A Lesion of Dissent

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Et introibo ad altare Dei,
Ad Deum qui laetificat juventutum meum.

Chapter One

When in memory I return to the wreckage and turbulence brought to so many Americans by the upheavals of the Sixties, to those twists of destiny and snarls of fate so bizarre and tangled that students were gunned down, an American city gassed by its own military, a democratic convention turned into a battleground as divisive as the Civil War, and the violence of bombings and assassination a too common specter on the nightly news, I am not ashamed to admit the sentiment that I, these many years, have felt for Carol.

If the times were callous, they also offered choice, though for draft-age men a choice of war, prison or exile made little sense. Accustomed as we were to the preceding long, calm years of affluence, we were prepared for choices no more difficult than between a stereo and a hot rod, between a lithe Lisa and a petite Patricia. My meeting with Carol in a country as far from home as the populated earth could offer was as incomprehensible to me as the babble of Amharic in the dark Ethiopian night that pre-dawn morning in Addis Ababa when I heaved my pack up the steps of the Gondar bus.

A thousand miles northward we would consummate our romance, an exotic interlude walled in chance and in a chemistry of human relationships lodged deep in nether regions uncontrolled by the intellect; walled, too, deep beneath the earth in the funereal splendor of kings while war raged and xenophobia assaulted the country above those ancient chambers where we dallied. Love pursues a course of birth as fixed as the biological one, in the womb of contact swells to an embryo that is either courted and nursed to life, there to triumph or to fall diseased to human insufficiency, or it is cracked from its shell and aborted. Only in uncommon instances is that embryo love left suspended, uncracked, unnurtured, still living.

In those days, my mind crammed with philosophies I only vaguely understood and my pack crammed with everything I owned, I fancied I carried my responsibilities on my back. That morning I dropped them on Carol's foot, the metal frame of my cheap canvas haversack gouging her ankle. "Ouch," she said, and so we met, I then still nursing hopes of returning to America but not honest enough to openly admit it, and I was anxious to claim the letter that I hoped was awaiting me at the American Express office in Cairo.

Carol's anxieties were more immediate, centered on her ankle. She shoved the pack back at me with her free foot. "Sorry,"' I said. Dim light shown on her through the smeared bus window. She was wrapped in a *gobbi*, the drapes of warm cotton that Ethiopians of both sexes huddle within on the cold, high plateaus. One white fold of the soft cloth looped over the top of Carol's head and was pulled around across her face. I saw only dark eyes and a shadow line on her brow that was thrown by the bus window's crossbar. Had she not spoken, I would have taken her for a native and passed by to slouch by myself in a seat somewhere in the interior of the bus.

So began our romance that was to span continents and years, with *ouch*, with *sorry*, with a gouged ankle, and yet the days we have spent together I count on the fingers of my two hands. Perhaps the pestle was already pounding in the mortar, mauling the ingredients of our first morning into a yeastless dough. Certainly our meeting was trite and inauspicious enough.

"On your way to Facil's Bath?" I asked. I slung my backpack up into the rack over Carol's head, where hers, too, rested.

"Facil's bath?"

"At Gondar. The man who built the castles and tried to copy European kings." I hesitated. "Can I sit with you?"

"My God, yes. I thought I'd be the only American on the bus. But I'm going to the Blue Nile Gorge. I never heard of Facil."

"A pretentious man, long dead," I said. I edged onto the narrow bench seat but even thigh to thigh and despite my thin stature, my left side hung partly into the aisle. No matter how we shifted and scooted in the cramped, uncomfortable seat, I hung like that our entire journey to the north and west.

A boy, eight or nine, bounced through the bus door with a pan on his head and screamed back past my face. His breath was foul. He screamed again and started down the aisle. I grabbed the pan and tilted it towards me to see into it. Eggs rolled out into my lap. Hard boiled. "Make a pocket with your *gobbi*," I said to Carol. Carol's hands appeared from within the folds and the garment dropped away from her face, but involved in buying the eggs, I did not then much observe the high cheekbones and delicate fingers nor the smooth, sun-tanned complexion of her skin. I dumped a dozen eggs into her care and slid a hand into my jeans to search for coins.

"You must like eggs," she said.

"It's a two-day trip." Even then, at the beginnings of my wanderings through these remote regions I have come to prefer, I had learned that there is always food at the beginning and end of a journey, but that days can pass between with only a lemon to suck or a scrawny banana to gulp for nourishment.

"The ticket man said the bus was stopping at a hotel tonight," Carol said.

"That doesn't mean there'll be anything to eat--or rather, edible." I beat the boy down on the price of his eggs and handed him some coins. "How come you know about the Blue Nile Gorge and not Facil's Bath. They're always together in the guide books."

"I was a geology major at Berkeley until I figured out it was all a waste."

"A waste?"'

"Nobody hires lady geologists. Except high schools for teachers. Or maybe department stores taking on Christmas help. So I took the tuition money my dad gave me and got a passport. I only wanted to be a geologist so I could see these places."

Rain came suddenly, large splashing pellets that smacked on the roof and sides of the bus and fell inside through the open door. I pushed at the door, trying to close it, but could not make it move. Already a puddle was building on the floor and beginning to run back under the seats. Dawn was still an hour off. A few figures had been moving ghostlike through the muck and rubbish of the station grounds, hawking tickets and carrying baggage, selling food and crumpled magazines. Some were passengers seeking out the long haul buses. All disappeared, ducking into the ramshackle company offices that ringed the yard or sheltering in the unfilled vehicles. The dim, yellowish streetlights, bare bulbs strung round the yard on spindly poles, went out. The leap of darkness, like the lights going out in a theatre, filled me momentarily with that same expectancy of waiting for the curtains to part. I even pushed myself a little straighter in the hard seat.

"Breakfast," Carol said. I heard in the dark the crack of an eggshell and then felt her hand touch mine. "Peel your own." She laid the little egg with its splintered shell in the palm of my hand. I made a fist around it and heard the crack of Carol tapping another egg against the wall of the bus. "I suppose the driver won't come now until the rain lets up," she said.

"They never leave anyway until there's a full load."

"What would happen if someday there just wasn't a busload going?"

"It never happens. They wouldn't do it this way if it did." Blithely I assumed the air of an authority, as unthinkingly could have attested a thousand other banal cliches. It was so

easy in those times to witlessly toss slogans into a conversation, as if we were all veterans of the World War of Experience. Perhaps it is years that reveal to us our innocence.

"You wouldn't happen to have some salt, would you?" Carol asked.

"No. Why?"

"I hate eggs without salt."

A following wind caught up with the rain, driving it in upon us through the open door, which folded back on itself in the middle. I stood and kicked at the fold, an egg half eaten in my hand, and finally discovered a wooden wedge driven between the bottom of the door and the step. I wrenched the wedge out and sat back down, my shoes and jeans soaked, my hand soppy with dirty water. The yard lights came back on as I wiped my hand across my jeans. The lights brought a rush of people from the offices, the door I had just managed to close was banged open, and the bus, before perhaps three-quarters full, filled rapidly.

The driver and a ticket boy came on last with an air of territorial privilege, slamming the door shut. The driver opened his side window to toss out a cigarette stub, then shoved a few personal effects into a small wooden box nailed up where a rear view mirror should have been, and finally settled heavily into his seat to light a fresh cigarette. I noticed he smoked a brand slightly more expensive than those I had purchased for a few cents the day before from a kiosk outside my hotel.

Tuned to some internal clock or schedule, the driver sat without moving except for the motions of puffing his cigarette, then suddenly reached out and hit the starter. The engine ground, spluttered, whined and caught. The driver flicked on the headlights. They lifted feebly across the lot to a bus facing us perhaps thirty feet away, beams barely strong enough to throw their own reflections back. The windshield streamed water. The driver said something loud and sharp, and the ticket boy came running forward. He positioned himself by the steering column and reached up to grasp a lever protruding through the front of the bus above the windshield. This lever he began to pump, back and forth until he found a steady rhythm, and outside the wiper blade moved in time with his arm. The driver found first, and our journey began.

Chapter Two

There is no comfort on an Ethiopian bus. Buses that do not leave the station until every seat is filled observe no schedules, nor do they arrive at any destination at any predictable time, and along their routes, punctuality is neither a condition nor an expectation. In their journeys, however, they grow crowded beyond the scope of Western dignity. With the gates of the departure city's bus station left behind, every short-hop passenger stuffed and crammed into the center aisle is a fare that jangles in the driver's pocket. Cruising in the clean and cushioned coaches of Europe and America is still a part of that country's distant future.

There the seats are narrow boards with perpendicular, spine-banging backrests, and the cramped leg-room admits no slouching. Only the first seat, fronted by the steps of the entry well opposite the driver, where Carol and I sat, allowed its occupants room enough to stretch their legs. But passengers entering and leaving at the frequent halts thought little of tramping on our feet and eventually, upon feeling the brakes applied yet another time, we would quickly draw in our legs and protect our toes under the seat.

The aisle gorged with passengers. Fat women boarded clutching squalling babies, accompanied by bony, harried menfolk carrying shoulder-height staves. They pushed to any empty aisle space and plopped straight down on the dirty floor, our small and cherished excess of leg space giving way body by body, baggage parcel by baggage parcel. The curious possessions of an impoverished culture mounted before us as passengers entered and stowed their cardboard packages, tin boxes and shackled chickens, their enamel pots of food tied in grubby bandanas, and for one long, smelly stretch, a trussed and frightened goat. At every stop our passengers of the aisle rose and craned their necks, pushing and shoving and shouting to make certain their particular possession piled there at the front exit was not pilfered. In memory, it seems each time those riding rearmost became the loudest and most aggressive, it seems too that it was ever to unload a passenger riding in those back depths for which the bus had stopped.

There being only the front exit, a slow piling over bodies ensued, which those who remained squatting on the floor endured calmly, seeming to take being stepped upon and walked over as part of the natural order of things. In that ancient country, perhaps it is, and perhaps it is not so different in the countries of progress and plenty. But I am no judge of those more fortunate regions. Too many years have intervened since I left their comforts behind.

For a short time a student wishing to practice his English squatted beside me, balancing himself with an unwelcome hand on my shoulder and making grammatical mistakes as frequently as the bus bounced and jolted in the rutty, pot-holed road. Eventually a new oncoming of passengers squashed him back and his place was taken by a young and pretty mother, a girl still in her early teens. With innocent dignity, she bared her heavy breasts and rode beside me, switching her hungry infant from pap to swollen pap. The baby burped and vomited, another smell to mingle among those others that rose on the overloaded bus with the heat of the day and the climbing sun. I clung to the bus's virtue. It was cheap, and went a goodly distance.

An hour out of Addis Ababa, a pothole as big as the bus wheel brought my pack bouncing out of the rack overhead. With the lurch of the bus out of the pothole, the pack's strap caught on the edge of the rack. The pack teetered and hung, on the verge of spilling down upon us. I thrust my hands up to shove it back, stretched half from the seat

as the bus thumped down into another rut, sending me lurching over on top of Carol. The pack fell back into its place.

"Sorry," I said, adding an apology for clumsiness to my previous gouging of her ankle. We had not yet spoken much. "I hope the Blue Nile is all you expect it to be."

"You mean to make this trip worth it?" Carol had pushed me gently back.

"Yes. I feel like my brain's being pounded out of my head."

"Maybe those baths you were talking about will be more to the point. Is there a sauna?"

"The baths haven't worked for over two hundred years. Ever since Ethiopia plunged from the eighteenth to the seventeenth century."

"I heard it the other way - they're rushing forward from the fourteenth to the fifteenth."

"It depends on whether you're an optimist or a pessimist."

"Which are you?" Carol asked.

"About Ethiopia or in general?"

"In general."

"Neither. Mostly, I keep hoping things will get better the whole time they're getting worse. The two sort of cancel each other out."

"Nonsense," she said quietly. A thin smile parted Carol's lips as she steered our idle conversation to a turning point. Like someone working backward through an algebraic formula, her gaze sought from a simple answer the long equation that preceded it. I looked away and let the budding conversation die.

Bus journeys, when one has made many of them, rest in the mind like one long, continuous session in a movie house, the film sprayed upon the screen an immense travelogue of grays, blues and greens, the original cinema *verite`*. Lumped into the myriad other journeys I have made since, that slow trip up the Gondar road with Carol is set off chiefly by the stops and starts of our conversations. Endurance, which the conditions of the bus dictated, brought with it a drugged monotony. To become aware of some green and graceful mountain, a deep and rugged ravine, or the eerie drift of pearly fog on a high plateau brought also awareness of the discomfort we traveled in.

"I thought the train from Djibouti was the worst it could get." Carol said. "But at least that wasn't cold." In the high altitudes of central Ethiopia the thin air turned chilly each time the bus curved into the shadow of a mountain or hugged the shaded wall of some narrow valley. Carol threw closed the *gobbi* she had kept hanging over her shoulders. "I hate being cold."

"That's two things." I said.

"Two things what?"

"That you hate. The other was eggs without salt."

"Make it three then."

"Okay. What else?" Passengers were jammed in all the way to the door in front of us, a swaying wall of clothes and elbows and fingers shrouding our view through the windshield.

"I hate people remembering everything I say," Carol said. She was looking straight ahead, directly at the wide back of a fat, middle-aged woman.

"People either remember things or they don't. It's not something you hate them for." Enclosed in the tiny cubicle of swaying bodies, Carol's comment hung uncomfortable between us.

"Hate doesn't have reasons. I just don't think my feelings about eggs are worth remembering."

"So I'm supposed to have a little man in my head that says, 'Wait, don't remember this?' It doesn't work that way."

"No, it doesn't. The way it works is people always think they're remembering things exactly like they happened. But they distort it, like a bunch of soggy pizzas, but they're so close it sounds like the real thing. They say you said it, and it seems right, and all of a sudden you're inside somebody else's distortions, so no thanks."

"But you can't just say things and then have us both pretend you didn't."

"That's not what I'm talking about."

And it was not. Quotations from this book and that were at my lips. But Carol was spared that assault by an argument erupting almost in my ear. Three old men had crammed into the bus at the base of a long, steep slope, up which we were now slowly grinding.

"*Genzeb*," the ticket boy demanded, his palm out for fares from the old men. Their white robes were yellowed and dirty, and each wore plastic farmer's boots. The oldest had thick whiskers turning gray. The three men talked amongst themselves, pointing each to each. Suddenly they turned together on the ticket boy and jabbered, gesturing towards the top of the long hill. "*Genzeb*," the ticket boy shouted again and smacked his open palm with the backs of his fingers.

The old men's jabbering turned shrill, indignation and anger filtering through the words I did not understand. The oldest talked longer than his companions, then, with dignified finality, made a last gesture towards the top of the grade and fell silent.

The ticket boy yelled for the driver's attention and began to motion for the old men to get off. But to stop the overloaded bus on that steep slope would have been to forfeit forward motion, bringing a long backing to the base to begin the climb anew. The driver ground on, geared down into low, the accelerator pressed to the floor and the bus barely moving. The ticket boy was uttering short flat sounds, curses surely, and the three old men were grinning.

The bus stopped immediately upon gaining the summit. The driver, too, added his shouts to the ticket boy's, and the old men got off laughing. They leaned on their staves, faced forward towards the easy trek downward on the slope's far side, and watched the bus pull away. Carol leaned out the window and waved to them.

"A little nerve goes a long way," she said. She, like the old men, was laughing.

"The driver doesn't think it's so funny."

"Oh, come on. The bus was going up the hill anyway. What difference does it make if the driver is out a few pennies?"

"Everybody else here is paying,"

"So what? The old men beat the system and I think it was clever." We let the matter rest. I had enjoyed the old men duping the driver as much as Carol and yet somehow found myself arguing the opposite side. In those days, it was not my habit to be open with my feelings. I seemed always to be searching, in even the most insignificant matters, for an intellectual stance to preserve. By the time years later in California, when Carol and I spent our last night together splashing and making love in the cold, moonlit pools behind the Tassahara monastery, events had thoroughly stripped me of that habit. But in essential ways, my concerns were still the same.

"Why did he build the baths?" Carol asked, reverting suddenly to an earlier conversation.

"Facil? Who knows? Maybe they seemed the best thing Europe had to offer."

"Was he a good king?"

"Like Henry the Eighth maybe. Only here power always stays closer to the reality. Facil cut his enemies' throats with his own hand. There's a tower in the middle of one of the pools where he used to bleed the victims." I was watching Carol as I spoke. "It was court entertainment. The nobles were called in to watch, and hope they weren't next. There's a special ledge with the stains still on it where he drained their blood down into the water."

I caught a quick tightening in the tendons of Carol's throat. "There's something about death and danger, even hearing about it, that makes all my nerves wide awake," she said. "I remember making love once after a Free Speech demonstration. Students had been getting shoved around with night sticks and the police were arresting people in big trucks. Making love after that was like I could feel everything more."

"I got clobbered at a sit-in once," I said. "Mostly it just hurt. It certainly wasn't exotic."

"No, of course not. Not if you're the victim. It's when you come close but get away. That's when you feel everything more."

"Out here I'm not going to worry about that. There's not much in America I want to get beat up by the police for - or shot in Vietnam for, either."

"But it can all be changed."

"Not by me," I said. "I already tried." Not many had yet fled the draft into exile, and most who had left the country were in Canada. I did not expect Carol to understand my point of view.

"By everybody. If enough of us get together, they'll have to listen." Even then it sounded naïve.

"It's hard to get together from inside a jail cell."

"Jails are only so big. And as for Vietnam, you could go into the army and not cooperate."

"Sure. Sit in a stockade instead of a federal prison. It's not a choice I care for."

"Hey, get real. You can't just walk out on your country."

"I already have," I said. "I left when my draft board took away my deferment." And for the sake of posture, I sprung closed a deceit upon myself. Exile. Man without a country. But in reality I still waited for a decision on my final appeal to the draft board - the letter I was anxious to retrieve in Cairo. I nourished a slim chance for a deferment on the contents of an appeal I had carefully worked and reworked in a small hotel in Nairobi. Somehow the moving northward gave me hope, as if by being closer to the draft board I could influence their decision. Somehow, too, I slipped into playing the part of exile to Carol. Perhaps there lurked in my mind a residue of romantic films about trans-continental trains and the exotica of chance appointments in strange places. In such settings, truth is an easy sacrifice.

Chapter Three

The sunset held no color, and the hotel at which the bus stopped that first night was as unremarkable as the darkening sky. The walls were mud and wattle, on the inside papered with Swedish newspapers hailing Johannson's heavyweight title fight victory over Floyd Patterson, an edition that seems to have been printed by the millions and sent special delivery to every remote corner of the earth. The roof was rusting sheets of corrugated tin nailed to sapling poles, and only a moment of confusion retrieves that hotel room from the oblivion of countless other one-night resting places.

A thin girl of perhaps twelve led Carol and I around the inside veranda of a barren courtyard to a single room with a single bed. "You take it," I said. "I'll get the next."

"Let me know if you find any luxury suites." Carol dropped her pack down on the bare, straw-stuffed mattress. A coarse woolen blanket was folded across the foot of the narrow board bed. A straight-backed chair, on which sat a candle stub upright in a shiny sardine tin, and a piece of cloth strung for a curtain across the glassless window were the room's only other furnishings.

"Where's my room?" I said to the maid. There was no response. I asked again, using my bare, baby-talk knowledge of that obscure language.

"You here," she said.

"No, she's not my wife. Another room, please."

"Hotel full. You here," and reflecting our child level abilities in each other's tongues, we lapsed into children's contradictions. "Yes" and "no" we batted back and forth with smiles, scowls, grimaces, and cajole, the volume and pitch of our voices ranging high and low.

"Oh, stay and take the floor," Carol cut in. "You'll never settle this."

"You're sure it's okay?"

"Well, you're not getting anywhere with her." The maid was already using Carol's interruption to edge out of the room. Carol was sitting cross-legged on the bed. Her hand shot suddenly out, and with thumb and forefinger she made a stab and pinch at the mattress. "Fleas!"

"They come out now, just at dark," I said. I walked over to the bed, dropping my pack on the floor and sitting on it, the mattress just below eye level. Carol's hand snapped out again and then I saw them, squads of scurrying black creatures that searched and stopped and scurried again, and though I have encountered their brethren in many countries, I have never quite figured out for what it is that they search and scurry. "You can't possibly kill all those."

"I can't sleep with them either. I swell up and itch like crazy," Carol said.

"We could try in that village the bus went through just before we got here." The bus had stopped for the night a few hundred yards beyond a roadside collection of shabby storefronts and stave-fenced compounds.

"I didn't see any hotels coming through."

I shrugged. "We couldn't do much worse, even sleeping out." We shouldered our packs and went out past the maid without explanation.

The town had electric, but the shops were lit with pressure lanterns that threw light far brighter than the dim electric bulbs lighting the houses. Leaning on the shop counters were the Arab half-caste owners, and ranged behind them were walls of shelves stuffed with plastic pails and buckets, tin glasses and enamel cups, and stacks and stacks of shiny aluminum boiling pots, each shop the same as the next. I have wondered, in frustrated

moments of shopping here and there in remote towns, if there is not a Universal Salesman who crisscrosses the developing world, his wares ever the same, his route ever a few steps in front of mine. Scattered amongst the shops were little tea houses with straight-backed chairs, and a single bar. There, in the bar, we met McIntyre.

Hunched forward at a wobbly wooden table, he was drinking brandy by the glassful, and there we gave up our search for a hotel. It is idle now to speculate on the different courses our lives might have taken had we not met McIntyre. "War!" McIntyre had thundered - in memory I can only recall him thundering everything - when he heard my plans to go to Cairo. But surely without McIntyre in the equation Carol and I would have passed through Egypt days earlier and been somewhere out on the Mediterranean before that year's lightening war with Israel interrupted our journey. Or perhaps, without my wounded pride to assuage, we would not have proceeded against all sense, against repeated warnings, into Egypt at all.

At the very least, Carol knew he was following somewhere behind us in his Land Rover that next day when she insisted we leave the bus at the rim of the Blue Nile Gorge. But the intricate shifts of fate, the variations of destiny, the alterations of chance I sifted through my mind during the lonely nights of my long exile are only that - musings on tropical verandas.

McIntyre was drinking Meloti, sticky-sweet brandy made by expatriate Italian distillers in Asmara, and he was already drunk that first night, his bulky body pitched forward around a plastic water glass filled to the rim with drink.

"Americans?" McIntyre's eyes drew a bead on us as we entered, but the rest of his body seemed to curl around the drink, as if preparing to defend it should we prove foreign to both the country and the man. The glaring pressure lantern caught and glistened in the pupils of his eyes.

"Americans," I said. "My name's Paul Rhodes. This is Carol."

"I'm Mac," he said, "for McIntyre." He half rose to shake my hand. He was too young for the weight that was settling towards his stomach. "I'm glad you're Americans."

"I never thought of it as a special virtue myself," I said.

"But it is. You wouldn't either one of you turn down some of this brandy, would you?" McIntyre thumped on the table and a bar girl came hurrying with bottle and glasses.

"'After that bus ride, I'd drink anything," Carol said.

"That's what I mean about Americans," McIntyre said. "The Brits would sit here and choke before they'd pour rot this bad down their throats." McIntyre poured a glass to the top and pushed it at me. "Lucky for me, I guess," he added, not really to us, and I was not at all curious about why he said it.

"Not so much brandy for me," Carol said.

"Cautious is she?" McIntyre asked the question of me, perhaps already probing the contours of our relationship. His eyes had scanned across Carol's bare ring finger as I had introduced Carol without her family name, at the time a name I did not yet know. "She knows her own mind," I answered.

"Swell," McIntyre said.

"Swell?"

"Sure. A woman that knows her own mind won't let any of this dumb talk that comes out my mouth when I'm drunk influence her opinion of me. Sober, I'm likable." This last he said straight to Carol.

"So I'm supposed to ask why you get drunk if you're so likable?" Carol had taken the bait.

"Right. It's because I'm a water wizard."

"A what?" Carol and I both asked lt.

"I go around villages showing the natives where to dig wells."

"Here?" Carol glanced at me. "This is one of the rainiest places in the whole world. Half the Nile River starts around here."

McIntyre smiled. "Your UN and mine," he said, raising his brandy but not sipping. "Guess what it's like to go into a village that's two feet deep in mud and say, 'I'm here to find water for you. For free. Because the world cares. Cares about you in your grimy little huts, cares about your kids stuck to their knees in the hog wallows you call streets and wants you to have a water well, you grubby peasants.' "

"I'd drink, too." I said.

"They've even got a canned speech in the local language for me to give, like those encyclopedia salesmen back in the States use. I start off talking one thing and suddenly I've got them agreeing to a contract. And I'm on a three-year one." McIntyre's gaze dropped into his brandy.

"You could quit," Carol suggested,

"And lose my draft deferment? I plan to be way on the far side of twenty-six before I take that chance." McIntyre bent to his glass and gulped. "I'll sit here stewed to the gills in godforsaken nowhere for three years, by god, yes, I will. Yes, I will." Even when he mumbled, he roared.

I sat silent, my eyes on the brandy McIntyre again bent to. "There are worse fates," Carol said.

"Sure. All those poor jerks in Vietnam. Sometimes, though, I think they got the better of it. I mean, there's only a few actually out in the jungles fighting."

"One other thing about Americans," I said. "They're always talking about Vietnam." But I failed to get the hard edge I wanted into my voice. McIntyre was pouring round again, though only his glass was empty.

"What I'm doing is dangerous, too," he said.

"Especially to your liver." Carol watched his glass fill up.

"I mean dangerous when I'm out in the field." McIntyre was too glazed to much care about what was being said. "Ever hear of the *shifta*? They cut throats just to steal your boots."

Carol's eyes dropped to McIntyre's jugulars. "I don't see any scars."

"They're not where you can see them." McIntyre winked, but with both eyes, his two eyelids closing down and down over his reddened eyeballs, pausing at the close of the downsweep and then one eyelid after the other sliding open in slow, slow motion. Briefly I suspected the drunken water wizard to be about to stand and unclothe, baring scars of combat with mountain outlaws. But the pressure lantern hissed, drawing our attention as it flared brightly for a few brief seconds and then grew soft and greenish. The barman came rapidly from his post at the counter to pump the waning light with short, swift strokes. But it would not revive. The little bar darkened to the amber dimness of a single bare electric bulb.

"No more light tonight," McIntyre said. "He's too cheap to gas it up again." There were empty tables and the three of us bunched together, the barmaid and the counterman standing at the rear.

"It's not like he has a thriving clientele to keep things going for," I said. "In fact, it looks like we're keeping him open."

"Which is a good thing," Carol said. "We still haven't found a place to stay."

McIntyre seemed genuinely surprised. "Stay here if you want."

"This is a hotel, too?"

"Well, a rent-a-mattress mostly." McIntyre motioned to the corner farthest from our table. "That's what those rolls are over there. He spreads them out on the floor at night and then lays plastic tablecloths over them for between you and the bugs. He washes the plastic everyday."

If nothing else, McIntyre taught me that - that there would always be a place to sleep in the far and distant villages I fled through in the ensuing years. In those ancient cultures where spiffy hotels are a new and recent event, liberty and democracy may be puzzling concepts, but rest is an inalienable right.

"You two haven't even said where you're headed," McIntyre said, probing again.

"To the Gorge myself." Carol said. "Paul wants to see Facil's baths." I caught McIntyre's quick appraisal and sudden tensing as his mind pursued the implications of different destinations. But I knew little then of that peculiar hunger which afflicts American men placed long in foreign isolation, the neurotic, consuming gnawing for a white-skinned woman.

"It's all in the same direction," I tried. "See the Gorge. See the baths."

"I'm headed that way, too," McIntyre said. "I wish the Rover wasn't so damn full."

"No room at all?" Carol asked.

"I sidetrack out into a village tomorrow first thing with a bunch of pump equipment to deliver. Then I shoot into Gondar and up to Asmara."

"So you might have some room after the village?" Carol pressed.

"Some, maybe," McIntyre said, noncommittal. "It depends on how much village stuff I have to haul in for repairs."

"Anything would be better than that bus."

"I generally stop at the Meskal Hotel in Gondar," McIntyre said. "You can check there and see what the situation with the Rover is when I get in." I sipped the sticky brandy and watched the conversation turn into a dialogue between McIntyre and Carol. For no particular reason a boy wandered in from the dark street and stood close to our table, staring at us until the barmaid shouted at him. As if the shout waked him out of a daydream, the boy pulled a sheaf of bright yellow lottery tickets from inside his shirt. Holding them towards us, he stared from one of us to the next and back around again.

"Shove off," McIntyre rumbled. He turned his head and said something to the barmaid in her language, who nodded and glared at the boy. Everyone stared at the boy. He did not move.

"How much can I win?" Carol asked,

"Save your money," McIntyre said. "They sell a million of those every month."

"Come here." Carol beckoned to the boy. He laid the sheaf of tickets down on the table and stood close. Carol riffled through the tickets, not really looking at the numbers. "I feel sorry for him.

"Don't get to feeling too soft," McIntyre said. "These kids make more in a month off lottery tickets than most farmers here get for a whole year's worth of crops."

"I thought lotteries fed starving masses or something," Carol said. "Hey, wait. This one feels lucky." She pulled a ticket from the sheaf and laid it out on the table. With a slender finger she underscored the long number written across the top.

"Feels lucky? That's a new one." But even as he said it, McIntyre was leaning over towards Carol and the ticket. "Hey, it's on me if you really think it'll win."

"Just feel it. Feel the vibes. I'm sure it's going to win."

But McIntyre's hand was too unsteady to trace the course Carol's finger had followed. He pulled some money from his shirt pocket and handed it to the boy.

"Okay, you made your sale." He stared at the boy. The boy retrieved his sheaf of tickets, clutched McIntyre's money, backed away, and left. I never did discover exactly when and how the ticket got into my backpack. But the little puddle of winnings it eventually brought me in Asmara was at best a mixed blessing. I was still recovering from the bruising McIntyre had by then delivered to my ego, and the hassle of changing my winnings to dollars on the black market came close to landing me in jail. Sudden-favored with lottery luck, in Asmara I grew incautious, I became prey.

Recounting the events of this journey now, it seems blind chance that Carol and I should even once have found our paths re-crossing after she rode away from me in McIntyre's Land Rover. There were ages, in the smaller, more constricted times of the ancients, when years and lives could intertwine with no more than a casual curtsy to the statistics of chance. But in this world, grown so vast and teeming, one is led, almost, to a belief in Fate. Almost. But that night in the bar, the lottery was not important, and there were concerns more immediate.

"I never saw scenery more spectacular." McIntyre was gesturing vaguely towards the door and the dark beyond, immersed in some interior vision of the countryside. "So lush sometimes I think the rain falls green, and look who owns it. A bunch of dumb farmers and big-butted whores."

"Whores?" I finally re-entered the conversation,

"Sure, whores. Wife-swapping didn't just start yesterday in southern California. They've been doing it here for three thousand years. Hell, they swap whole villages."

"And you without a wife to trade. It must be frustrating," Carol said.

McIntyre half-snorted. "Good lord. I'm the biggest diversion to hit these villages since Gillette razor blades beat out broken bottle shards for shaving."

"So what's to complain about then?" I asked.

"First, they smell. Like old butter or something. And then they giggle. And third, there's not a soft bed in the whole damn country." McIntyre's eyes fixed on the dim bare bulb hanging from the ceiling. "Just a little tenderness," he said. "If they were just a little tender. That's what white women have. Tenderness."

"Maybe they've got a different way of being tender," Carol said.

"Maybe." McIntyre's eyes did not move from the light. "Probably, even. But I can't get close to it."

And all my posturing was upstaged by McIntyre's statement of simple need. I thrust myself into exile, where life is walled with the sharp, shear edges of calculated decisions, and McIntyre, plunging and wallowing through his mud and dark flesh, opened like a vulnerable wound. He was not one who, drowsing in a sunlit field, would choose a rock to cushion his head, or standing ravenous at the banquet table, crunch on bitty seeds to sate a hunger. Not McIntyre.

And Carol touched him. Ever so briefly, her fingers reached out to the hands he had wrapped around the brandy glass. Though our bodies had rubbed all day in the bouncing bus, she had not touched me.

"You'll be okay," she said to him, and all our eyes were on her hand that had brushed across McIntyre's.

"Sure," McIntyre grinned. "Didn't mean to get sloppy on you people." The barmaid appeared from some shadowy corner, interrupting, speaking rapidly in her own language to McIntyre. "She says the generator turns off in another five minutes or so. We'd better

get our bags spread if we're going to sleep here." We chose our places on the floor - I remember a large red rose printed on a field of gray on the plastic tablecloth spread across my mattress - while the electric bulb dimmed and dimmed in warning until it was a small globe of sickly yellow; then it surged to sudden brightness and went out. Outside a late moon was risen. From time to time solitary figures, ghostlike in their white *gobbis*, passed along the still street. An hour passed, and I could not sleep. I groped my way through the darkness and went out.

I turned to my left and began walking, away from the direction of the flea-plagued hotel we had abandoned earlier in the evening. One of the town's skinny, tawny dogs, pug-faced and stunted from generations of inbreeding, barked from the moon shadows. Other dogs picked it up. Here and there candles flickered behind shuttered windows. Near the edge of town a *gobbi*-wrapped figure joined me silently from behind.

"It is not safe, sir," he said.

"What's not?"

"The savanna at night. There are many hyenas."

"As brave as your dogs that bark from the shadows?"

"Our dogs know their own strength. They do not leave the village at night."

"If no one leaves the village, how do you know it isn't safe out there?"

"In the daytime you see the cattle and the goats eating the grass. In the mornings, we find the bones and fresh carcasses of the ones that do not come into the village for the night."

"Including men?"

"Including foolish men."

"Perhaps then, all your men are either foolish or they stay at home. You have no brave men who go into the fields and drive away the beasts."

"Beasts are to be lived with, sir. They cannot be driven away." We stood together looking out over the moonlit savanna. "Where could beasts be driven to?"

"To haunt another village."

My companion shrugged. "Yes, and they would drive their beasts here. It is better to be content with what we have."

Folk knowledge, usually mundane, always conservative, has a way of sounding wise. I forgot for the moment that I had cast myself as one who refused to accept the inevitability of familiar beasts.

"Your American friend in the bar stays on the savanna some nights."

"McIntyre?"

"That is his name? He is always drunk when he stops here. The people say it is because he sleeps out there sometimes. It can make men crazy."

"That's not what McIntyre says."

"We do not always believe what men say about themselves." The moon rose up and up, so bright I could read the numerals on my watch, but I cannot recall my companion's face. Perhaps I never looked. For some reason he told me the story of the clever donkey. Each day its owner, a miller, drove it across a small river, burlap bags of flour strapped to each side. One day the donkey slipped into a deep hole and was pulled down by the weight of his load. But the river washed the flour away between the holes in the wide weave of the burlap. The donkey escaped with his load considerably lightened. After that, each day, the donkey managed to slip into the hole and lose the flour he was carrying,

The miller, growing tired of his daily loss and angry at the clever donkey, warned the animal several times. But each day the donkey continued to slip into the hole. "The last

time," the miller said one day. "The last time." The next day he packed a special set of bags and loaded the donkey. "Do not slip into the hole today, clever donkey, or you will not be so smart as you think."

But the donkey paid no heed. At the river, he once more slipped into the hole, waiting for the rushing water to wash his load away. On the bank the miller counted away the minutes. "I warned you," he said when the last bubbles of the donkey's expiring breath broke the surface and there were no more. "Now you have learned the hard way that a bag of stones is not like flour."

We laughed together, our voices floating through the silver sheen of the African night. A strange encounter, such as I was seeking.

Chapter Four

Down twisting loops of gravel road the bus receded into the vast Blue Nile Gorge. Wisps of afternoon clouds floated at the far rims of that enormous canyon. A hundred switchbacks below, the Blue Nile glimmered, source of the fertile floods of ancient Egypt, the verdant valley an immense gash of history cut wide and deep and green into the fragile western highlands of Ethiopia.

Carol let loose a blue bandana. Her long brown hair caught in an updraft sweeping out of the gorge. Her jeans were tight and faded, and her summer blouse, white, rippled in the breeze. Our packs were dropped beside the dusty road and we stood at the canyon's rim, a steep descent at our feet. A wind-shaped treetop was trying to push up above the valley walls at the tips of our shoes, and very much I wanted to kiss Carol. But she was held in private communion, poised at the lip of the beginnings of histories, immersed in the silence of visions I did not share.

We had left the little town in the grayness of early morning, McIntyre still sprawled on the bar floor asleep, his burly body curled half out of a sleeping bag. We were among the last to board the bus, but the driver had kept vacant for us our previous day's places at the front. The journey began again with a quick relapse into the sameness of the first day's discomforts. It changed only when there was tossed aboard a crazy man, chained and frightened. He thudded at our feet in the step well at the front of the bus.

The ticket boy squirmed out of the crowded depths and stood braced against the driver's seat, one foot on the crazy man's shoulder. The bus jolted onward. Shackled, the man twisted and slobbered on the floor, bouncing and rattling. Mile after mile his dark eyes stared at my shoes, and I at him. No guardian, official, custodian or attendant traveled with him. He had simply been dumped onto the bus by two policemen, cargo to be delivered up again at some further destination.

"I can't stand it," Carol said. The bus had traveled several miles. "Let's put him up in the seat." The man's legs were flopping in the well leading down the two steps of the bus door exit. The chain was wrapped around his bare ankles and then pulled up between his knees to bind his wrists. In the chafe marks, splotches of blood were seeping out, crimson against his dark skin.

"They'll think we're crazy," I said. Only we were paying any attention to the crazy man. He flopped again and the ticket boy's big toe was almost in his eye.

"He's not an animal," Carol said. She reached across me and pulled the ticket boy's arm. "Your foot's in his face."

Carol pointed down, but the ticket boy merely stared at Carol. "Don't put your feet in people's faces!" Carol spoke loudly, plainly, shaking her head "no", finger still pointing. The ticket boy grinned broadly and looked at me. Carol shoved him. He toppled back in concert with another jolt of the bus, landing against the passengers across the aisle.

"Leave it alone, Carol," I said. "Crazy people are on the level of animals in this culture. They wouldn't understand what you're talking about even if you could say it in their language."

"It's time they learned then." Carol rose out of the seat and knelt by the crazy man's head. She shoved her hands beneath his shoulders. Behind me a woman said something loud and laughed. Others also laughed. Carol pushed and the crazy man bounced part way up. The bus bounced in a rut, and Carol pitched forward over the man. He writhed beneath her, terrified, his face buried against her stomach. The bus bounced again and

Carol could not regain her balance. The passengers were laughing and shouting, standing and straining forward to see Carol sprawled on the crazy man.

The laughter bounced off the top of the bus and doubled itself in echo. Someone, a teenage boy, grabbed my arm and spoke, pointing down at Carol. The bus quieted as he addressed me, and then laughter burst even louder through the packed seats.

"Shut the hell up!" I yelled, a McIntyre roar, and standing, I faced them. The woman of the first comment said something swift and sharp, and laughter rose again. "Forget you, lady," I said. I reached down and by her shirt collar, I pulled Carol back into the seat. Her hair, too, was in my grip and I heard her gasp. I saw the passenger woman purse her mouth, ready to relay more commentary to the other bus riders. I grabbed the crazy man and yanked him to a sitting position in the bus well.

His chains were not locked, only pulled tight and hooked, like a dog chain clipped to a collar. I wrenched up slack and loosed the man's feet, then his hands. The shackles clanked down as the onlookers went suddenly quiet. The chains rattled in the well and their sound seemed to boost the man up. I turned and pushed him at the passengers.

Freedom came to him as to a harlequin puppet whose several strings are suddenly jerked all at once. Legs and arms churned, akimbo, direction unimportant. Only movement mattered. Fearful of his thrashing, the aisle passengers crammed and shoved their way into the jammed seats. A slim space cleared, and down it the crazy man swarmed like a swimmer before whom the water parts, his arms swirling and swirling in strokes that paddled air, that slapped faces, smacked noses and ran fingers into eyes, his hands flapping backwards from heads and faces while his legs thrust him forward.

In the rear, passengers could make way no more, but the frenzied man drove onwards. He piled into a mass of cowering bodies, lost his balance and for a moment disappeared. Then he rose on a web of fending arms and hands, leveled out, and fishlike, suddenly quiet, he turned sideways above the passengers, and slithered out the window. "Stop," I shouted, but he was gone.

"Stop," I shouted again, this time to the driver, but the bus bore on. The passengers resumed their places, their eyes on me still standing facing them.

Carol grabbed my arm, "Make the bus stop. The man might be hurt."

"Dead, even," I said. "Move over."

"But stop the bus. Do something."

"I just did do something. They were right to have him chained."

"'But--." Carol turned and stuck her head out the window, trying to see back along the road. I sat down and focused on the oncoming green of the countryside. The chains had slipped down into a little pile at the bottom of the well. "Maybe you're right," Carol said. "Maybe you shouldn't have let him loose." I reached down and scooped the chains out of the well, then pushed them past Carol and dropped them out the window.

"They were laughing at you," I said.

"But it turned out dangerous for him to be free. I was only trying to make him comfortable."

"We might all be dangerous free," I said. Certainly we would be less comfortable. Freedom and comfort are so obliquely antithetical that it is surely one of the great enigmas of our times that America, a nation founded so squarely on the precepts of freedom, should turn so stolidly to the pursuits of comfort. Surely.

"Oh, god, there you go trying to make something I didn't mean out of something I said again," Carol said. "I'm not enjoying this trip much."

Not much later, we stood alone on the very verge of the Blue Nile Gorge, gazing across the clouds floating in the canyon's broad spaces and gazing, too, down the walls and centuries of its meandering. There passed with the moment, from borning to dying, my first desire to kiss Carol, more tender I think than it was ever to be again. Behind us a broad savanna spread its deceptive emptiness. Below the bus had disappeared behind the face of a rounded outcropping that thrust like a battlement from the cliff wall. The bus would not appear again until it had reached the hazy bottom of the gorge. On the far wall the road winding upward was faintly visible, but on it nothing moved.

Eventually Carol turned and walked slowly to her backpack. From a side pocket she pulled a spiral stenographer's pad, flipped it open, made what seemed to be a check mark, and then closed the notebook again. "I've got a list," she said. "The world's great places. This is the first place on the Nile part of my list. Sometimes I wonder what I'll do when I finish it."

"Make a new one," I suggested.

"I don't think it works that way,"

"What doesn't?"

"How you go from one thing to another in life. It's not all in order, one thing following another like driving down a big highway with big green signs. Some places are 'Exit Only', and it takes a long time to get back on."

"Or maybe you never do get back," I said. "You just stay stuck on the back roads."

"Sure. Maybe. But whatever happens, it ought to make sense."

"I guess it does, if you're old enough. At least I don't hear old people say it doesn't."

"Maybe they just don't think about it."

We lifted our packs and began the long descent. The road switched back and back upon itself again and again. Along the cliff wall, rocks and ferns and moss dripped little rivulets of water. The rivulets turned to tiny streams that spilled over mossy rocks, the splashing of these miniature cascades loud in the immense silence of the canyon. Walking had been Carol's idea. Mine had been to ride through the gorge on the bus and spend the night in the luxury of a bath at Gondar.

For a mile the bus had edged back and forth along the rim of the gorge, affording us glimpses of spectacular grandeur and then turning away again before making the final approach to the first switchback. "Lets get off," Carol had suddenly said.

"Here?"

"Yes, here. Come on."

"But--!"

"Come on. We'll get a lift with whatever comes later. We can't just ride past this." She stood up, shoving by me in the seat and reaching for the luggage rack. She gave no time to my urge to object, to contradict because I had not the ability to agree. Carol grabbed the driver's shoulder, motioned for him to stop, and I followed her out.

But the hours passed into late afternoon, and nothing came to give us a ride. We tramped slowly down the switchbacks, for a short while the bus we had abandoned a distant speck moving slowly across the white concrete bridge that spans the Blue Nile. For a long time the bus appeared and disappeared on the far cliff wall as it labored up the hairpin curves.

"There weren't any other buses at the hotel this morning. Maybe there won't be another until tomorrow," I said.

"Then I guess we'll spend the night. Do you mind? It's so peaceful here."

Camped with a pretty woman in Africa by rushing river waters? How could I mind? I could even hope a bus did not come. For the first time I wondered how far behind McIntyre was, how long his village errands would take, and hoped his business there would keep him the night. Each turn of the twisted road took us deeper into that great valley, towards the warmth of bright sunshine reflecting up from the wide river, and whatever our words and differences had been in the cramped and crowded bus, they were suffused, transformed, or made insignificant by the awesome size of the huge chasm. Halfway down, resting, our legs dangling over the edge of the road, Carol's hand rested in mine.

"I was having some doubts about traveling with you," Carol said.

"I guess I wasn't being very likeable. It's kind of a hard time in my life."

"I felt sorry for you last night when McIntyre started talking about Vietnam."

I nodded. "I didn't want to get into another Nam discussion. But it hurt, some, being reminded of it. Then every so often I see something like this, something so big and overwhelming, and there's a feeling I get, like it's all sure to work out right somehow."

"I know what you mean," Carol said. "If nature can be all this beautiful, life has to be, too. That sort of feeling."

"Yes, that sort of feeling."

There were to come other times and other places where I would feel the same, and it took years for me to abandon that particular conceit. We glimpse nature's preening and her beauty and forget humankind's separate reality. Nature swallows her intruders, but we are diverted, deflected, and descended upon, innocents, victims, willing imbibers of delusion. It is so easy to forget that nature loves death more than life, and that it is grim deceasing from which splendor evolves.

"Tranquil," Carol said. "That's the way it makes me feel." But the easy feelings of that hour by the roadside were already forgotten the next morning when McIntyre 's car came slipping down the switchbacks splattering mud and we stood dripping and soaked in the roadway waving our arms while he was still so far away we could have been little more than pinpoints to his vision.

He pulled up grinning. "Got rained on, didn't you? Storms come quick in the gorge." He had his head leaned out the window of the Land Rover.

"It was one nasty night to get stuck outside," I said. Carol approached the Land Rover while I picked up our packs. "I hope you've got some room in there."

"Not a whole hell of a lot. I'm hauling in a heavy-duty generator for an overhaul. I'm not real sure I got the motor to make it up the other side."

"But you're the first car we've seen since yesterday."

Mclntyre rubbed his chin and looked at me. "Well, look. Why don't I try take Carol and your packs into Gondar. There's a bus an hour or so behind me, and we can meet up at the Meskal. If the car won't make it up with the extra weight, I'll signal you with my horn that you should be on the lookout to pick up Carol somewhere on the other side."

So it was settled, and Carol rode away. "Just ask for 'Mac' at the Meskal. They all know me," Mclntyre said and grinned.

"See you in Gondar," Carol called.

That I would not, I did not suspect. Gondar was close, and I turned my attention to the road behind. Already the bus that Carol and I had waited for through a rain-swamped night was slowly negotiating the first switchbacks high up near the rim. But I do not remember much about the bus ride from the gorge into Gondar. In some cramped corner I rode, my mind on Carol. We had not made love. Clouds had swept swiftly in from the

west, and we had descended the final switchbacks in drizzle and gray twilight. We found only a rocky overhang on the slope of the riverbank under which to shelter.

The twilight quickly changed to a night of blustering winds that blew bursts of rain beneath the shallow overhang. The feeble fire we had nursed to life in the last moments of evening light was quickly out, and the clouded night was solid black. We leaned together, our soaked sleeping bags draped over us, drenched, cold and miserable. I remember vividly the chattering of Carol's teeth and the shudders that swept her body as walls of rain blew in from the heightening storm, and I remember my stoic effort to not submit to the soaking chill. But beneath the little sheet of thin plastic we had spread to sit upon, the ground turned to mud. I, too, gave in, and shivered through the night.

The Blue Nile poured by, loud and unseen in the darkness. For hours I strained to see it, but when at last first light from a gray dawn made it faintly visible, I had dozed. I awoke and the river was there, the storm was slackening to drizzle. We ate the last of our eggs and tried to get the fire going again. It smoked, but gave off little heat. And then the sun came out. We walked onto the bridge and waited for a ride. On the bus, after McIntyre drove away with Carol, I let myself believe that our night shivering together in the cold and rain gave Carol some reason to wait for me. But such are not the nights from which a bond is formed, and I did not need to nurse my delusion long.

The lobby of the Meskal was old, its surfaces not dirty but tired, paint puckered on the walls like crocodile skin. The board floor was bare and dry, its finish long worn away and neglected. The desk clerk did not look up when I entered the empty lobby, nor turn his attention to me despite the echo of my steps on the wooden floor.

"Mac's room," I said. For seconds it seemed the clerk would not respond.

"Mr. Mac gone," he said.

"But he said to meet here."

"He gone to Asmara."

"And the girl?"

"She gone, too. With Mr. Mac,"

"But they've got my backpack."

"That in your room."

"My room?"

"Mr. Mac come, give your pack and pay one night. Then he gone." The clerk blinked and handed me a key dangling from a large wooden plug. "Upstairs, on left."

All the way up I nursed a dead hope that Carol would be there, waiting. I told myself that a telegram could have been awaiting Mclntyre, summoning him urgently on, and Carol had stayed behind to tour Facil's ancient baths. But only a bed, a basin, and a hardback chair awaited me. Hot baths were extra.

Chapter Five

For the ruins of Gondar, I had lost my enthusiasm. King Facil's ancient castle and deep brick baths, moss-laden and empty, were diversion for less than an afternoon, and the impoverished families camped in the bare, musty rooms depressed me. I took the next day's bus to Asmara and a room over the Café Royale.

In this city, Mussolini had once sited a capital of his short-lived African Empire and built broad boulevards to attract colonists from the provinces of Italy. These boulevards I strolled, passing cinemas housed in colonnaded structures that belonged to another era and little shops with black awnings that announced jewelers, boutiques, shoe shops, and stores with European sundries. In Asmara, the young soldiers of Il Duce had finished their military service and stayed, turning to shop keeping and expatriatism, and had erected there a European enclave that was Ethiopia's only concentrated venture into the twentieth century.

At almost every intersection along those long boulevards there stood a pharmacy, as if posted on those corner crossings as especial sentinels to any so brave or foolish as to turn off into the squalor of the backstreets that led through the unsanitized native sections of the city. The bright Italian boulevards were a thin façade.

At the Café Royale, newsboys cruised the crowded tables hustling, to knots of foreigners, day-old copies of European newspapers. There I spent slow afternoons reading and sipping tea from stubby glasses. At intervals, the gleaming chrome espresso machines mounted at both ends of the long formica counter would hiss, and hiss again, and waiters brought refills with only the barest of summons. A tall, square post rose floor to ceiling in the middle of the room, and on each side of the post hung a large Ethiopian Airlines wall calendar with pictures depicting the splendors one could visit along the country’s interior air routes. From these calendars I computed days and weeks, guessing and guessing again when the letter I awaited might arrive in Cairo.

These years later, it is hard to understand why I then so cared, why I fixed so completely on Cairo. A simple note to the American Express office there could have re-routed the letter to Athens. Or Nairobi, or to a hundred other cities. Whatever message it contained, it was already far too late to change it. But I had then an uncommon freedom, bound not by time nor place nor person, and so, lacked a sense of prudence. I had chosen Cairo, and I believed, I guess, in my choices. Pride, nurturing a vague sense of destiny, pushed me forward. Perhaps I thought I was important.

Eventually, gossiping at the Café Royale, I learned of Carol and McIntyre. They had traveled on to the Red Sea, to swim and sun on the warm islands that guard the port at Massawa. My route lay in the opposite direction, a slow journey west through Keren and Tessenei to the Sudanese border. Beyond lay Kassala and the desert train to Khartoum. But each day I delayed, and in time I found Carol's lottery ticket stuffed down in a side pocket of my pack. On the back, in clear letters, was written, "Good luck - Carol Layne."

I went down early to the café that day. With the help of a newsboy, I scanned the long lists of lottery numbers posted in the windows and discovered I held a hundred dollars worth of luck. I smiled at the newsboy. He laughed and called to a friend, signaling him to guard his pile of newspapers. "Come," he said. "I show you where for getting money."

The newsboy led me far down the long boulevard to a section of buildings where the city was lapsing into decay. Here the colonial villas of Il Duce's forgotten conquerors served now as government offices, and in a stuffy room with high ceilings and wooden floors I collected my winnings. "Could I have it in American dollars?" I asked the cashier.

The cashier did not bother to answer. He put a purple excise stamp on the receipt, over my signature, and pushed a bundle of Ethiopian notes across the counter top. Behind him other clerks sat at broad brown desks sipping tea, doing nothing.

I turned and went out, a tip for the newsboy ready in my hand. He was not on the steps where I had left him. I looked round. The house itself was stucco, two stories high, and was ringed with a high stone wall, embedded at the top with shards of broken glass in many colors. Within, in the tiny patio, the untended descendants of foreign shrubs pushed up randomly through the flagstones, and a grapevine, straggly from years of inattention, spread fruitless on a rotting arbor. Beneath the arbor a little man in a light brown suit and tan loafers was sitting on the cement rim of a long-dry fountain. He smiled. "Want dollars?" he asked.

I looked at the red banknotes in my hand. They were worthless beyond the borders of Ethiopia, and the banks were not permitted to exchange them for other currencies. "Maybe," I said. "What rate?" I knew already that wherever governments controlled exchange, black-markets flourished.

The little man barely bothered to haggle, and I liked him for it. Two of his front teeth were missing, one upper and one lower. I counted the green American dollars he put in my hand, buttoned them in my shirt pocket and handed over my winnings. The little man smiled again. "You're under arrest," he said, and took back the dollars.

We took a garry to the jail, the horse trotting down narrow streets paved with cobblestones, the plainclothes officer and I riding side by side behind the driver in the little, two-wheeled cart. We left behind the high plastered walls of the old Italian section, the compounds now marked off by wooden fences of upright staves jammed deep in the muddy earth. The jail was a large wooden building, unpainted, enclosed by double barbed wire fences eight feet high. The little man paid the garry driver with one of the red banknotes I had just handed him.

"Come to my office," the little man said. Inside, a few men in black uniforms sat on long brown benches with rifles resting butt down on the floor between their knees. In front of us a narrow counter cut the room in half, and we passed behind it into an area of clerks. At the back side of the receiving room a guard unlocked a door and let us through into a dark hallway. Halfway down this corridor of closed doors we entered a bare office. The windows were high. At one side was a desk and swivel chair. There the little man sat down, swiveling to face me, his back to the desk.

"The fine for illegally changing currencies is very large," he said. "How much money do you have?"

"Only enough to get to Cairo if I leave right away," I said. He almost scowled. Standing up, he walked behind me and yelled something out the door. He returned to the desk and stood beside it, waiting.

"I'm not rich," I said. He did not reply. Behind I heard the door open. An aide entered and brought two glasses of tea to the desk.

"My colleagues advise me to take all your money and issue immediate deportation orders in cases like this." He picked up one of the tea glasses and sipped. "They say that you foreigners have credit cards that the airlines honor to take you out."

"I don't."

"Then that is your problem."

"Perhaps the money I exchanged is enough to pay the fine," I suggested.

He handed me the other glass of tea. "You're my first arrest," he said. "My wife's father got me appointed to the police last week."

"You mean you've never done this before?"

"I worked a couple cases with my father-in-law, but he took all the money. Do you find the tea okay?"

"Just right," I said. "What did you do before this?"

"I graduated three years ago in meteorology--in St. Louis. But here there isn't any work for meteorologists."

"It rains all the time anyway."

The little man shrugged. "Most of my friends still have no work. They think I'm very lucky to find a wife with such an influential father. And I am. I'm not even sure why she married me."

"You seem like a nice person," I said.

"Thank you. Would you like more tea?"

"'Actually, I'd like to go. Will the money we exchanged be enough?" The little man hesitated. "Please," I said. "I really don't have very much."

"Where are you going?"

"Khartoum, then on to Cairo."

"There is no black-market in Khartoum," he said. "Except for Johnny Walker. Alcohol is forbidden there. But in Egypt the black-market is good. In Cairo, the rate is very high. Everyone's trying to get their money out of Egypt." But I did not ask why.

"I'11 probably change at banks from now on," I said.

Once more the little man shrugged. "You were not very careful."

"You could have trapped me down in the bazaar just as easily," I said.

"Oh, no. They would kill me if I went there. In the bazaar, they protect their business. I pay people like the newsboy to tip me off."

"I guess I took a chance then. There's not much I can say."

"Everything is chance. You bargained nicely. That's why I'm not taking all your money. You were polite when we bargained."

"Thank you."

"More tea?"

"No. May I go?"

"Yes. To Khartoum. The bus can get you to Keren tonight." I left.

The skies grew clearer as the bus ground west. I was approaching now the southern reaches of North Africa's vast deserts, and in those miles the land turned from green hills to parched brown and then to sand. The desert sky was brilliant blue and cloudless, and at evening the sun settled orange and round and stark on the long straight-edge of the horizon. Carol receded to memories that were green, wet and cool, and I became caught up in the daily rounds of bargaining for eggs, cactus fruit, long round loaves of bread, and bottles of imitation cola at the stops along the way.

At Kassala, after the border crossing, I barely noted the change from bus to train, so same was the desert, the crowded seats and the slowness of the trip. It was a train unconcerned with speed or time, almost reluctant to move, and I half expected the conductors to apologize for the faint breeze created by its motion--a breeze that brought the desert's scorching heat in upon the passengers. From the tall black smokestack of the train's old engine, smoke and soot arched back above the first class cars, then sagged slowly down towards the carriages until it settled thick upon the last-class cars in which I rode, crowded in among the robed Muslims and their great bundles of belongings tied in muslin sheets.

At intervals, they prayed together. In sun-bleached wastes of level sands that stretched only to more wasteland, the slow train would coast to an almost imperceptible stop. Each car would empty, the passengers pouring out to the shaded side and spreading their prayer mats on the hot sand. Then the prayers began, a vast bowing and rising that stretched the length of the train, and in the deserted cars I walked and stretched and enjoyed their emptiness. I came to look forward to the prayer stops and the chance to be alone. Though I could not have been more alone. My companions in the train knew nothing of the war I refused to fight, nor cared. In a land that considered distinctions between country, politics and religion absurd, my American objections were pointless.

At night the clear, clean skies shone with a million stars I had never seen before. I leaned on the windowsill, twisted round on the wooden bench, and learned that in the course of darkness stars, too, rise and fall. Around me passengers slept and snored, and Khartoum grew hourly closer. Sometimes my mind made words of the chunk and grind of the train wheels on the track, and dark hours glided by in drowsy conversations with the steel rails.

We entered Khartoum at night, very late. The train slowed to another of its imperceptible halts, and this time we were in the station. Bare bulbs burned along the covered platform and taxi drivers waited in the street outside, but beyond the city was dark and quiet. I shouldered my pack, after the long journey anxious for exercise.

I passed down silent streets, through empty squares and along sidewalks over which arched broad, fat palms. Later, in the gray light of early dawn, I stood on the bridge at the joining of the two Niles, the White Nile winding down from the center of Africa on my left, and on my right, once more, the Blue Nile. It was swollen now, its flow swifter and deeper than the morning Carol had left me standing on its banks in the green Ethiopian valley. We had each - Carol, the river, myself - traveled by our different routes far distances since that time. I thought of her that morning while I leaned on the bridge railings and watched the sun rise over the confluence of the two Niles. That shortly we would travel together again I had no premonition, no inkling. I listened to the mosques calling yet again the faithful to their morning prayers, then turned and crossed the bridge into Omdurman and found a cheap hotel. There were three days to pass until the next train north to Wadi Halfa, where the rail line ended and the Lake Nasser ferry docked for the journey into Egypt, to the great earthworks dam at Aswan. Behind the dam, in those days, Lake Nasser's waters were still rising, and from around the world, teams of Egyptologists had come to make their final digs before four thousand years of ancient wonders were forever flooded.

Had I, like many Americans arriving in Khartoum, gone to the American Club to eat hamburgers and drink imported beer, I would have heard of the deepening tension in the Sinai. Even before I started northward from Khartoum, Egypt had ordered the UN peace-keepers from the region, but the crude Arabic I was mastering buying dates and kebab and living cheap in Omdurman across the river taught me nothing of the impending conflict. I would head north in ignorance, my thoughts on my letter in Cairo, any wars but those of America outside the arena of my concerns; and in the Arab heartlands, hysteria was still days away.

The night of the Wadi Halfa train, I checked out of my hotel in the late evening with hours still to kill. I retraced my route of the first night back across the bridge, then turned along the broad, tree-lined bund that flanks the Blue Nile. The tall palms had their fat lower trunks painted white and a low stone wall ran just by the edge of the sudden steep drop down the riverbank to the water. Randomly, the stonework turned to benches, and

there men sat and smoked and watched the moonlit waters flow. I came eventually to a white hotel, an imperial remnant of England's empires looking down upon the dark river from behind a grillwork fence and a carefully tended garden laced with flagstone walks.

A raised veranda looked out over the garden, in which tiny spotlights backlit vines, and thick shrubs burst with purple blossoms. White pillars ran the length of the veranda, so too did white wicker chairs and tables. Alone amidst the empty tables of the veranda a foreign woman sat, her green dress far too short for the customs of that part of the world, and over her bare shoulders she had draped a single lacy wrap. I do not remember even hesitating to enter the gate, cross the garden and climb the broad steps of the veranda to sit near her. "Tenderness," I recalled McIntyre intoning.

"Sir?" A waiter had approached behind me, apprehensive of someone toting a backpack onto his well-kept veranda.

"Lemoni," I said. "Lots of ice." Perhaps what Mclntyre had really meant was someone to talk to, a chance to use one's own language. But I found no way to start a conversation, though she sat just a table away. Once a mosquito buzzed. She waved it away. Once she sipped the clear drink resting on the arm of her chair. I nursed my lemonade, letting the ice melt down to cut its sweetness. The waiter had disappeared again. Empty tables stretched the length of the colonnade behind her. Finally she spoke. "You could come to the cabaret if you like looking at me so much."

"Cabaret?"

She nodded. Her frosty blond hair was pulled back along the sides of her head and pinned neatly into a tight roll at the back, her face was smooth with powder and makeup, her lips made full and wide by glossy lipstick.

"I don't think I could afford it." I glanced at my lemonade. "Even this is an extravagance. I'm sorry if I've been staring."

"The way you've been sneaking looks at me, I thought you must've seen my act. Lots of people know me that I don't know them, you know."

"I didn't even know Khartoum allowed cabarets. Islam's pretty strict about things like that, here at least."

"There's everything here that there is everywhere else. Here just they don't use so many flashing signs is all. But you wouldn't believe who owns the cabaret. He's in the government if I told you."

"I've been living across the river," I said. "Not much happens at night over there."

"It does on this side," she said. "I never get any sleep." She sipped the last of her drink and then opened a small sequined purse that somewhat matched her dress. "This will get you in the door," she said. She extracted a blue pasteboard and placed it on her table towards me. I reached for it. She stood and walked down the veranda steps.

At the street she waited for only moment, and with no signal I could see, a taxi turned across the lanes and took her away. I looked at the ticket. It said, simply, "Cabaret", and gave an address.

Chapter Six

A mile from that imperial hotel, I found the cabaret. It was on a street divided into lengthy blocks and lined on each side by high, plastered walls daubed smooth. A small neon sign made a quiet announcement in thin blue letters. "Cabaret." It hung above a double wooden door set midway in a wall that ran the length of that darkened block. From inside, palm trees arched green fronds over the wall. I had walked slowly from the hotel. The cabaret opened very late.

At the door my blue pasteboard ticket was inspected without comment and I was admitted into a narrow anterior hallway that curved once and let into a garden - the cabaret. Tables and booths were made private by leafy plants and strips of potted shrubs, the seating areas stepped and the plants trimmed so all had a view of a square stage of waxed boards set before an arched doorway in the building wall, opposite the entrance side of the compound.

Through that door entertainers entered and left. A juggler was spinning two plates balanced on sticks as I was led to a small table at the base of a palm. A girl in a skimpy, silver lame` skirt assisted the juggler, and waiters passed in and out of other doors at the sides of the stage. The stage was bright with spotlights; the rest of the cabaret was lit with muted light reflected from the garden walls. Above, stars pierced the black sky.

At other booths and tables Arabs dressed in western clothes talked quietly and ignored the juggler. He finished and bowed, but none applauded. The juggler was replaced, unannounced, by a troop of dancers. I ordered a whiskey and watched. When the waiter returned, he brought two drinks. Behind him was the woman in green, but now she was wearing a slim satin robe that reached to her ankles. "I'm not on for a while yet," she said. Her robe was as white as the tablecloth. The waiter made a little ritual of seating her.

"I'm sorry if my staring at the hotel seemed rude," I said.

"They all stare," she said. "They just sit and stare at me."

"They?"

"Them. The Arabs." She waved vaguely towards the other tables. "But I kind of enjoyed all the attention when I first came here." She was leaning towards the stage. The muted light was throwing a bronze glow off the plaster walls. It reflected on her white robe. The dancers were clapping, and weaving a moving circle around two of their troop. The two in the middle were doing twirls and hopping, mostly on one foot it seemed. "They're Lebanese dancers," she said.

"Nobody's paying much attention."

"They're waiting for me. They'll pay attention to me." She surveyed slowly the semi-circle of tables and booths, but the plants and dim light made it difficult to distinguish figures. "When I dance, they don't move. Every noise stops. They want me so much they don't even breathe. They just sit there with sweat on their dumb little mustaches and stare."

"You must be quite a dancer."

"I studied ballet when I was in high school. Private lessons. My mom paid for them. Then I had some jobs in Las Vegas for a couple years." Suddenly her attention turned back to the stage. "Oh, they're finishing their dance. I'm on next." She took a quick sip of her drink. "Wait after and tell me what you think." She stood and walked back through the anterior hallway where I had entered. At tables I saw heads moving to watch her exit.

The Lebanese dancers were twirling faster, clapping louder, slim figures in tight black suits, their hair slicked straight back. Again there was no applause as the act finished and exited. But the stage was the center of attention now.

A master of ceremonies appeared. He wore a black fez and talked in Arabic. It was a long and rambling introduction, punctuated with jokes. The laughter the jokes evoked was loud and sharp, but it stopped short each time the introduction began again. "Now we tell one joke for Annette, in English so she can understand," the emcee said suddenly. "We all practice our English for Annette." Applause broke out. "The joke about Hassan the camel driver. You know him, maybe." Laughter rippled. "Hassan, he going across the desert with a camel it always give him trouble. Always it find a new way to give Hassan trouble." The audience tittered, familiar with the many tribulations of Hassan the camel driver.

"So one night Hassan asleep at the oasis and get up early. But the camel already out in the desert. Hassan take the saddle and walk out to camel. He get close, try to put the saddle on. Camel, it give a quick look, jump up and away go over the dune. Hassan go, try again, and camel do same thing. Up, away, over the dune. Like this many times. Hassan getting mad. He curse camel. Camel keep running, stopping, running, stopping."

"So finally Hassan come over next dune. Camel run so far Hassan never been this part of desert before. Down there he see landing strip and little jet airplane. Camel is sitting in shade under wing. Nothing else there. Landing strip, airplane, camel. Rest, just desert."

"Hassan go closer. Then he see by front of plane a man's head. Just head, no body. He look up in window of plane. There pilot sitting, just body, no head. So Hassan look at camel. Camel look at Hassan. Then Hassan go inside plane. There is sitting beautiful woman. Very beautiful! Blonde hair, nice - you know what I mean? Nice." The emcee made some hand gestures and the audience snickered. "'Oh thank you, thank you. You've saved me,' the woman says to Hassan. She starts crying. Big crying. Hassan not know what to do. The beautiful woman tell him what. 'They kill pilot, cut off head. Next they coming back for me. Thank god you've saved me.' Hassan getting more confused, so he go outside. Camel still sitting under wing, watching. Beautiful woman follow him out."

"My life is yours," she say. "I owe you everything. What you want, you say. I do anything you say. Anything." Hassan look at beautiful woman.

"Anything?" he asked.

"Anything," she say. "Anything at all. Just say. *Please*, say!"

"Hassan rub chin, look down at ground. Then at beautiful lady. She smile at him. 'Then, please,' he say, 'You come hold camel while I put saddle on.'" Few in the audience seemed to understand English. A few scattered laughs were the only response. A music fanfare, taped, built up as the announcer raised a hand in the air and then with a flourish proclaimed, "And now, Annette!"

Stage lights went out and a single spot caught the stage door. Annette entered slowly, wearing the white robe, and stood very still at the center of the stage. Then her dance, and the shedding of her clothes, began. She rolled her hips and stripped, baring her long, slim back, her creamy breasts. Taut-tummied, wide-legged, beckoning and turning, she presented her flesh. She reached slowly up and loosed her hair, almost naked, profiled at center stage in the bright white of crossing spotlights that threw sharp shadows of her body against the wall. Hands high above her head, she bent back and back, the tips of her long blond hair falling loose to the stage floor, and we watching each became her lover, pressing her to the floor until her shoulders touched in a pillow of spilled hair, and she lay, back arched, beneath us all. Her hands caressed her thighs, an invitation to the eyes and desires of the cabaret, and in the hushed night her gasps thrust upwards through the palms

to a cloudless sky. Near me, a patron grunted. And I, too, was riveted to her body, my desires swelling.

She twisted to her stomach, skin glistening in now a single spotlight, a last bit of filmy cloth slipping from her hips, and on the floor she called to all, then leapt upward to face us, within the blond bush of her pudenda, milk white, a tiny triangle of satin. And then she walked to the exit. On the stage boards the spotlight lit a bare circle. Into this we stared and did not move.

She joined me again, sipping whiskey neat, wearing now a shimmery blue dress. "I watched you," she said. "You got excited just like they do."

"You're very good," I said.

"No, I'm not. I only got chorus line jobs in Vegas."

"Millions of Americans don't know what they're missing."

"Don't give these creeps any credit. My act bombed out in Cairo. Khartoum's the end of the line."

"There's always someplace further on."

"Like hell there is. After Khartoum, where?"

Where indeed? My ticket for the Wadi Halfa train, a few hours off now, was already in my pocket. I, at least, knew my next stop. "People keep going. They survive," I said.

"Oh, a one-whiskey philosopher. You're in from the desert, aren't you? That's why you stared at me at the hotel."

"I said I was sorry."

"It's not a big deal."

"It just happened. I can't explain it."

She was looking now towards the empty stage, her words floating away from me. "You know why I had you come here tonight? So there'd be somebody I could sit down with after the dance and just talk with for a while." She looked back at me. "I'm so tired of the staring. They do it everywhere. On the street, in shops. I can't even go to a restaurant. They're always staring."

"I guess I understand. Some at least."

"No, you don't."

"Okay, I don't. I'd like to not argue though."

"Definitely that. Definitely, let's not argue." A waiter passed. She reached out and took a drink from the tray he was carrying. "I have to go mix with the patrons pretty soon."

"Part of your contract?"

She looked at me, but her expression was distant. "It keeps them coming back." She swirled the whiskey in her glass. "I don't know where I'll go after Khartoum, so I keep them coming back."

"You can take the train up to the Wadi Halfa ferry with me," I said. "People say the only thing that's left is a minaret sticking up out of the water where Lake Nasser is rising. The town's been drowned."

"Egypt? There's no way I'm going back there. That whole Israel thing is ready to blow." She leaned towards me and lowered her voice. "Do you know what these people whisper while they're making love to me?" She paused for just a second. "They call me their beautiful stomach. The one last night said I was his lovely intestine. And most of them speak English worse than that Hassan-the-camel-driver joke."

"Does he tell that every night?"

"Oh, there are dozens of those jokes. Hassan this, Hassan that. He's the national idiot." She stood. A group of Arabs at a nearby table called to her. "Thanks for coming," she said to me. "It was nice to talk to somebody. I mean talk real talk, not like I've got to talk now." She went over to the Arabs' table. In the cabaret, there was nothing left for me, and my ticket to Wadi Halfa called, my letter in Cairo leading me, like Hassan the national idiot, deep into the desert. I drifted once more into the streets. Far down the avenue a minaret stretched tall, slender and white over the dark palms of Khartoum.

I wandered towards the train station, staying close to the high walls that blocked out all view of the compounds within, and wondered in what rooms lovers sweated in each others' arms and behind what walls the long, hot nights were sweated away in loneliness.

Behind one of those walls Carol slept, but that I did not know, and in that night I felt all the ten thousand miles that lay between me and every friend I ever had. Soft and quiet as the earth's turn, the urge to return to America formed in my mind. At the tall minaret I stopped and stared, but all was silent and still. No muezzin appeared on the high balustrade, no one bowed or shuffled in the mosque's dark interior. Khartoum was settled in the solitude of its night, and I came hours early to a quiet train station.

For those traveling cheaply, the scramble to find seats in the train's less expensive carriages began in the deep blue of early dawn. Police lined the long platform at wide intervals while passengers with cheap tickets gathered behind a low wooden barrier. An ancient steam engine with a black cone stack shuttled cars onto the track in front of us, making up the train, with the first class carriages forward, parked in front of the station's waiting room, separated from the mob massing at the barrier. Figures began leaping the barrier and darting into the unreserved carriages at the rear of the train. They would appear then at the windows and call back their locations to clumps of relatives and friends waiting with loads of baggage for the barrier's gates to open. I, too, slipped across the little fence and onto the train. The police seemed not to care.

I found a seat in a corner and waited. Outside, lines of traveling companions began to form and pass bundles of baggage across the platform and through the windows. The temperature rose. A large round thermometer by the station clock hovered near a hundred degrees and the sun was still not in the sky. Inside the cars were full. Bodies pressed against me and all around me, and people sat in aisles atop the bundles of baggage, but the flow of passengers went on. Hands and feet scrabbled in the empty window frame behind my head as late-coming passengers swarmed to the carriage roof, where soon they would scorch in the desert sun. Police yelled at them to come down, but none obeyed. I dozed, waiting. Then the train jerked, and I awoke.

Chapter Seven

A shout swept through the train car. The Khartoum station was inching past. Long tan roof arches threw deep shade on the tiled platform, and mobs of family members stood back behind the iron rails of the platform gates as they watched and waved to relatives embarking northward. Officials of the Egypt & Khartoum Railway, dressed in white shirts with flat collars that lay open at the throat, sorted documents and papers at a cluster of open-air desks. A coolie, balancing a tray of glasses on one hand and carrying a plastic pail of sugar in the other, was serving them morning tea.

The shout in the train car rose in pitch; the passengers of the entire train caught the high point and brought the cry ululating down. Thus begins every journey in the territories of Islam, with a communal plea to Allah for a safe journey. The prayer echoed back from the station walls and passed, like the train, out into the back streets of the city. A coppery hand took mine. "*Fein timshi?"*

Where are you going? It is only complex questions that have but one answer. Simple queries have no limits. "Cairo," I said, struggling to say it in Arabic. My Sudani seatmate patted my hand. His flowing *thobe* was white, spotless and starched, and the *mashedda* that wrapped his head was tucked and folded into a white mound of cotton above straight, black eyebrows. My companion shouted my destination to everyone sitting round in the crowded car. "I'm going to At-Dimar," he said. The word meant nothing to me, whether it was a person or a place I did not know. I asked which it was and laughter swept round. The train had gained the outskirts of the city and was picking up speed. Its clatter brought some privacy to our conversation and farther passengers turned to their own diversions.

"What do you think of my country?" Somehow it is a question persons in every land cannot resist asking a foreigner.

"It's hot," I said, "but the people are friendly."

"Oh, yes. Here everyone is a friend. We are all Muslims. Everyone believes the same." People close by assented and a few exchanged praises to Allah.

"It's not that way in my country," I said.

My companion put a hand on my knee. "Someday it will be," he said. We talked on, but he knew nothing of the wrenching changes through which America was passing in those years, and I little suspected how deeply on the psyche of my generation those scars would be etched. My concerns were small and personal, and I still thought of my exile as somehow significant. My return to America, to the music and the marches, to the shouting and the rage that was binding us by the millions in a brotherhood of ethics and innocence, of drugs and ideals, of a shaggy acceptance of vaguely expressed goodwill, was still years in the future.

So the cramped and clamoring train passed out of Khartoum, finding the single track to Egypt that follows the Nile into the torrid heat of Nubia. The river glimmered blue and calm beside the rails, the water that had gouged deep into the fertile soil of Ethiopia now Aquarius to the desert, a gentle friend, the vein of life. I was moving on.

New sights, new places. Motion is the opiate of exile. In change I forgot my loneliness, and change and change and change again was the simple salve for any problem of the self, my ensuing wandering not a credential but rather a passport issued at the outskirts of hope. My hope then was a letter in Cairo. I doubt now I could have really believed it would bear any good news. But it was a reason for riding on, for going somewhere, for doing something.

In another class and carriage, Carol, too, rode that train. Far to the front where the seats were padded and the baggage was stowed away rather than piled in the aisle-ways, I would find her, but only after the train had switched engines a day later at At-Dimar and we were deep in the trackless waste of the Nubian desert. I remember being hungry. Distracted by Annette, I had not bought food my last night in Khartoum, and there was little at the occasional stops along the way but dust speckled dates and tea and stale bread.

Then at At-Dimar the cars emptied. One spur ran east to Port Sudan and the Red Sea while the northward track curved into Nubia, a waste of sand as ancient as written history. The Nile nurtures no life there, and riddled by cataracts, invites none to pass. A barricade of heat, the white sand rolls in long high dunes a thousand miles to the backwaters of the Aswan Dam. Only Imperial Britain has dominated that desert, laying a single steel track across the long level sweeps of sand amidst the twisting dunes. Even the great river turns away to skirt those wastelands, making a long loop west, but the British drove their iron rails straight through.

Few have reason to cross a land so desolate, and in the train car that had pulled from Khartoum so crowded, beyond At-Dimar I was the only passenger riding in the last-class carriages. I paced the length of the empty carriage and leaned at every window, stretched on every bench and propped my feet on the backrests. I napped and read and at the car's water tap, I stripped and wasted water splashing it over my body. I even looked for a broom, wanting to sweep the debris of the former passengers from the aisle of my private coach. Not even a ticket taker sought me out.

When evening came I sat slumped on a bench in the middle of the car, hungry. My stomach pushed me to explore forward through the train. In the better and more private coaches ahead, the doors of closed compartments let out snatches of conversation through the slotted wooden grillwork that admitted air but closed out sight. At the very front I found a dining car. I was early.

Black waiters - southern Sudanese - short and a little chubby, were spreading starched linen on the tables. "Dinner in twenty minutes, sir," one of them said. I asked for a cold lemonade and sat at one of the tables. A few Arabs wandered in, scattering about through the car, smoking and chatting in small groups. The waiters became busy in a pantry at the front. Carol came in behind me. I did not see her enter. "Can I join you?"

I remember looking up. She was wearing tan jeans, and thrown over them was a brightly-striped summer dress of reds and yellows. Talcum lay cool and white against the smooth skin in the scoop of her neckline. Her arms were tan and bare to the shoulders, and she smelled good.

"I thought you were going to wait in Gondar," I said, and though my words sounded like a reproach, I had spoken them without that intention

"If you're going to be mad, there're lots of empty tables."

"No, please sit. I just thought you'd be at the hotel."

"We didn't make any promises," Carol said, matter of factly, and then lightly, "We could just start over from now." She pulled the chair out across the table from me and sat down. Her eyes held mine.

"I felt disappointed is all," I said. "I like the way talcum makes you look so fresh." I recall saying that; I remember Carol's eyes softening as she glanced down.

"Mac started talking about the beaches at Massawa, and after that night in the rain, being warm sounded so good. We toured around Gondar for awhile and then went on. That castle you told me about wasn't much to see, actually." She picked up a knife from

the place setting and held it with both hands, her thumbs at each end slowly rotating the utensil. "I guess you got your pack."

"Yes. Thanks for the lottery ticket."

"Did it bring you luck?"

"Not really." Conversation does not flow easily when one unexpectedly encounters someone who was almost a lover. But silence is deadly. "How's Mac?" I asked.

Carol laughed. "A nice guy to visit, but I wouldn't want to live with him. He couldn't stop telling me how much better white women are than Ethiopians."

"That's what he was saying that night when we met him. Something about tenderness."

"He's got a whole theory. It goes on forever. And I mean forever."

"I kind of know where he's coming from on that. It's good just looking at you."

"I'm wearing some kind of Arab scent, rosewater or something. Do you like it?" A dune had built its delicate peak close to the track at that point. We glided into the shadow of a high ridge of sand. Before I answered her question, Carol reverted to McIntyre. "Mac says girls in Africa start work so early carrying water and firewood and helping their mothers take those great loads to market that they grow up knowing they'll look like old crones by the time they're twenty. So they just go from being little girls to bossy old women. No in-between."

"Maybe he'll win the Freud award for African psychology."

"You don't like him much, do you?" We passed out of the dune's shadow. The sun had dropped almost to the horizon, a glowing orange ball that cast Carol in silhouette.

"I hardly know the guy." But he had taken the woman I wanted. The same woman that events would take from me again in Egypt, again in California. If one can be led, almost, to a belief in Fate, then one can equally be led, almost, to the platitudes of what is not meant to be. Comfort, often, can be found in the knowledge that if one can push far enough into the future, there will come a place and time where no one will care about the past. But lesions do not heal, even when no one cares.

"I'd like it better if you'd stop acting like you're sore. What if it hadn't rained that night? We'd have made love and maybe I'd have gone on with McIntyre anyway."

"I guess I'm thinking about how I felt when I got to Gondar expecting to meet you and instead there was a paid room with my pack neatly on the bed. I heard this big 'ha-ha-ha' in my head like McIntyre laughing at me."

"Just in your imagination. It really wasn't like that." In the great waste of the empty desert, the track suddenly curved. Evening sunlight swept across Carol's face, and a soft smile crossed it, too.

"It made me feel lonely. I've been feeling lonely ever since," I said.

"You can't take off from the draft and not feel lonely. I've heard lots of guys talk about doing it, but there aren't many of you who have actually gone."

"No, not yet, at least." The food came then, a set meal which that night, in the middle of all that desert, featured fish. The waiter glanced at me and smiled at Carol as he served her. She returned his smile.

"You two smiled like old friends," I said.

"Some Egyptian's been trying to sit at my table every meal. The waiter's been helping out, but this guy's insistent."

"Don't you like Egyptians?"

"Not this one. He's pushy and self-important. And fat. Boy, is he fat. From what he tells me, we might be lucky not to get turned back at the border."

"I've already got a visa." My mind flitted to an image of my letter languishing in the American Express in Cairo while I argued fruitlessly with border guards.

"I've got a visa, too. But Nasser was right on the verge of ordering the UN out of the Sinai when we left Khartoum."

"I haven't kept up with the news."

"Mac got a bulletin from the consul in Asmara saying that there's going to be a war with Israel. They're advising all Americans to stay clear.

"Mac again."

"Not just him. I heard people talking about it in Khartoum, too. There were a lot of Americans at this one place I went to. They were all talking about it."

"So what happens if there is a war?"

"What always happens," Carol answered. Her glance went suddenly over my shoulder. "People die."

A very fat man paused at our table. He placed a hand, adorned by a gold ring inlaid with a carnelian scarab, on the table near Carol. The man was broad-shouldered and had the look of someone once strong gone to flab and fat. Carol stabbed a piece of fish and left it speared on her plate.

"You've found a friend to dine with," the man said to Carol.

"Yes. Paul's been sick and hasn't felt well enough to come to the dining car until just now," Carol said, hoping, I guess, that the man would go away.

"My pleasure to meet you, Mr. Paul. I'm Khaireldin."

"He's the Egyptian I mentioned a few minutes ago," Carol said. I had half extended my hand but Khaireldin was busy lowering his girth into the empty chair beside me.

"Fish requires wine," Khaireldin said. "I have some in my compartment." He signaled a waiter and gave some orders. "Wine's too bloody expensive in the Sudan if you have to buy it black-market from one of these fellows."

"Your English is excellent," I said.

"I studied at Sandhurst. I have been worried about Miss Carol traveling alone, unable to speak Arabic, during a very dangerous time for Americans to be travelling here."

"I've been getting by okay," Carol said.

"I don't doubt that you have. But it is what you do not understand that might get you into trouble."

"That's the way it usually is," Carol said. The waiter returned with a bottle and some wine glasses. The wine was red, very sweet and very warm. The waiter poured three glasses, but Khaireldin did not taste his.

"Carol was just saying there might be a war," I said.

"Not might. It is coming very soon now. Foreigners in Egypt will be in great danger. Very great."

"We're only passing through. I need to get some mail in Cairo."

"Do you think Israeli bombs can distinguish you from Egyptians? Do you think the people will believe you when you say you're not Israeli spies?"

"We're not."

"What you are will not matter. If war comes, you will be tried in the streets, not the courts. Suppose they bomb the dam. It is the pride of Egypt. We built it when no one would help us, by ourselves. Any revenge, on any foreigners, will be better than none if they bomb the dam. All Egypt will flood."

"You mean we'd be lynched?"

"Call it what you will. By the law of The Prophet your deaths would be just. During the last troubles, several Englishmen were thrown from the tops of buildings. They were simply schoolteachers."

"But we're not English imperialists. We're Americans," I said.

"So much the worse for you," Khaireldin replied. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I must join my colleague." A tall man in military uniform was sitting several tables to the rear. Khaireldin rose and joined him.

"I haven't seen his friend before, " Carol said. The friend sat facing us, listening to Khaireldin speak. His eyes were hidden by sunglasses and from an epaulette a gold braid wound beneath his arm. I was to learn his name in time, Colonel Shaffi.

"He seemed nice enough," I said. "He left us a whole bottle of bad wine, too."

"He was different today. Because you're here I guess."

"He seemed sure about there being a war."

"Mac said I could come back and live with him if the border closes." Carol looked out the window. The sun was settling fast below the horizon. "Sorry," she said. "I'll stop talking about Mac."

I sipped the bad wine and poured more. I had a sense of Colonel Shaffi staring at us. "I've got to get to Cairo," I said. "If there's a war, my letter could be lost for months."

"Maybe you could get a copy sent somewhere else. Why's the letter so important?"

"It is, that's all. Let's talk about something else."

"The fish?" Carol suggested.

"Sure the fish. I've been living on dates."

"I remember when it was eggs. How many did we eat? A hundred?"

"And without any salt. I still remember. You hate eggs without salt."

"I remember when we ate the last of them that night in the gorge. I was never so happy to see the last of anything in my life." Carol laughed quietly, then reached out and caught my hand on the tabletop. "We should have made love, storm or not. I wish we had." The train pulled through a long, gentle curve and the last of the twilight sun fell full on my glass of wine. Perspiration formed on the outside of the glass and ran in little rivulets down the stem.

Chapter Eight

The northern rails of the Egypt & Khartoum Railway end abruptly. The jerk of the train's brakes grabbing was a sudden signal that we had arrived. No terminus gave us forewarning, and there is no air-conditioned lobby with ice-cold drinks to attend to the modern Spartacus emerging out of Nubia. If that long ago dissident really did in that harsh desert endure slavery and did there nurture the hatred that one day grew to challenge the mightiest legions of Rome, and for a time at least, made an empire shake, then his escape north to glory would have taken him through that same barren valley that begins where Carol and I ended our train ride. But now that valley is a lake.

Footsteps away from where the train stopped, the southern reaches of Lake Nasser lapped at the sand. Further off, the Nile gently flowed into the placid backwaters of the Aswan High Dam. A grid of steel girders, piled like logs across the tracks in the holdup scene of a cheap Western movie, made certain the train did not overshoot the railhead and derail into the sand. There was no roundabout to turn the engine and no sign named the hundred yards of ramshackle huts that lay to the east of the tracks, away from the lake.

Once it had been Wadi Halfa, the farthest town of southern Egypt, a place now drowned in the same lake water that the whole world first condemned, then rallied against to save the ancient ruins at Abu Simbel. It is also the southern loading point of the Aswan Ferry Service. The ferry was at anchor when we arrived, drifting twenty yards out as the cloudless desert evening descended. The ship was a side-wheeler. Two levels of airless cabins, painted white with red doors, comprised the underside of a flat rooftop deck upon which travelers could ride in the open for half the fare of a cabin. During the day, to fend off the sun, a canvas awning was pulled above the length of the deck on a gridwork of iron pipes. But the ferry floated at anchor point that evening with the awning rolled up and crew members standing topside smoking and watching the train unload.

Carol and I stepped down to the sand from my empty carriage and turned toward the railhead. We had spent most to the day riding together at the rear of the train. We walked along the shabby huts, tin sheets and odd boards nailed together to accommodate the tiny population that eked out a living serving the needs of the twice-weekly passengers interchanging between train and ferry. A man in shorts, T-shirt and a frayed turban sold bottled soft drinks that he cooled in a bucket of lake water in front of one of the little huts. Carol looked out past the ferry boat. "Egypt begins out there, close by, somewhere," she said.

Carol pointed to two lines of low, barren hills that converged in the distance from opposite sides of the lake, the place where the desert ended and the Nile Valley flowed into Egypt. It was for this she had come, to see the huge lake that was then still forming behind the great earthen dam, a modern marvel the global powers had gambled that President Nasser couldn't build without taking sides in the Cold War. Another of the world's wonders would be checked off her list. "Five thousand years of civilization and the first thing we see is a ragged man selling pop," Carol said, and she treated me to a tepid imitation cola.

I had enjoyed the day. We had talked of little things, unwinding our personal histories to each other, and once I had napped, waking to find her tapping her fingers on the top of the backrest and singing to herself. “I miss the music in San Francisco,” she said when she saw that I was awake. “There’s this big old warehouse place now where everybody goes every weekend, and all these new bands keep playing all night.”

“The place that has light shows connected into the music?”

“That’s it. The Fillmore.”

“I heard of it before I left,” I said.

Khaireldin had wandered back from time to time during the day and sat with us, uninvited, unwelcome. "You must turn back," he warned. "You do not understand holy war. It is not rational. Stay away."

"There isn't any war yet," I said. "There might not be." The power of a fixation is not rational either. My little letter, or the weight of an Arab-Israeli war - when one wears the mantle of a cause good and just, whether it plays large upon the world's stage or merely in the arena of a person's mind, one believes that it has conferred on oneself an immunity to the ebb and flow of unrelated grievances. It is so simple to be wrong,

"Why do you keep warning us?" Carol asked. "I can't see that it matters much to you what we do."

"To see a mistake and not try to correct it, that would be wrong. That would be against The Prophet's wishes. You do not understand the *jihad* that is coming. You do not understand the fury that will be unleashed against non-believers. You do not understand where you are."

"We intend no harm. We support nobody's wars, not America's, not Israel's, not Russia's, none," I said. I found it ironic that in avoiding one war, I was stumbling into another.

"That, too, you don't understand. All of Egypt wants the war with Israel. Not to support it is a self-sentence of death. That is the teaching of Mohammed."

"Then I do not support Mohammed, either."

"More the pity then," and Khaireldin pushed his great bulk up from the bench as he spoke, "if you continue on." It was not the last warning we were to receive.

The ferry would not load until morning. Carol and I tipped the man selling soft drinks to watch our packs, and we walked to the lakeshore. The ferry was drifting slowly northward on the end of its tether and the sun was low.

"Paul, look." Carol was pointing past the stern of the ferry. The ferry's slow swing around its anchor point brought sliding into view a minaret pushing up through the surface of the lake. The rising lake had reached the little skywalk just below the door where muezzins had once emerged to call the faithful to prayer. Evening sunlight splintered off the brass crescent that topped the point of the minaret. "I wish we had a boat," Carol said, "so we could row out and watch the moon rise from the landing on the minaret."

"We could call some prayers. They'd carry a hundred miles over the lake."

"And what if Allah heard?" Carol asked.

"I guess I've always thought God would be farther off than a hundred miles. Farther off than he'd hear my call."

"In that case, what's the point of having gods?"

What indeed? "Lets swim out and when the moon's up, a Muslim moon, pointed and fingernail thin, we'll make love," I said. "Long, slow kisses and long, slow love till the stars wheel and God comes out that little door in the minaret and claps and cheers."

Carol turned to me, lake water lapping at her sandals, her dark eyes soft. But her gaze froze behind me. "Be careful along the lake shore," Khaireldin said. "The water's full of crocodiles. They come in close at night." Walking beside him was Colonel Shaffi, his sunglasses catching the dwindling sunlight splintering off the crescent moon atop the minaret's spire. Carol's hand found mine.

"You keep following me," she said. "This whole trip you've been following me."

"We are only walking by the water. Muslims like the water. It is our vision of paradise." Khaireldin had changed into a military uniform. Sharp creases ran down the short sleeves of his shirt; a row of ribbons was pinned above his pocket. "It is better that you join our walk than go here alone."

The sun slid behind the minaret and the reflection went out in Colonel Shaffi's sunglasses. We turned and walked north along the shoreline, Carol by the water and the two Egyptians on my right. Khaireldin pointed forward. "In a few minutes, we will cross into Egypt. Not that it makes much difference where the border actually is. There won't be a line drawn across the sand."

"What happened to the people in the town?" I asked.

"Some have been given land elsewhere. Others are being trained as fishermen. In old times, this was the last outpost of the pharaohs, the southern defense. Many of the men here join the military, like they have for as long there's been an Egypt. It is this town's ancestral heritage to soldier."

"Don't they resent the dam flooding their homes?"

"Only the rich resent the dam," Khaireldin said. "Americans and Europeans. In the US, people kept asking the Colonel and I how Egypt could flood so much precious art."

"You were in the States?" Carol asked. The thin Muslim moon was rising in the east. I dropped back a step and saw that Carol, too, was watching it come over the horizon.

"We attended the War College at Fort Benning. But that was when our governments were still friendly. Before Eisenhower refused money for the dam."

"So the Russians built it instead. You got your dam anyway," I said.

For the first time Colonel Shaffi spoke, his voice much deeper than Khaireldin's. "The Russians did not build lt. Egyptians built the dam, thousands of them carrying dirt in baskets on their heads because our country can't afford bulldozers and steam shovels and big trucks. Our people sweated and died in the heat when the only thing the world cared about was an old temple carved in a cliff. How many people would not have died if the money donated to raise Abu Simbel had gone to buy equipment to build the dam?"

Khaireldin joined in. "But your country gives Israel bombs and planes so that Jews can destroy our art, our monuments, civilization's history. Yet we weren't supposed to build a dam to make life better for our people." We had stopped walking and stood facing each other, Carol and I watching the horned moon rising above their heads. The air was tense, and I sensed that somewhere we had crossed that invisible line into Egypt.

"Don't blame us," I said. "We were kids in school when that dam started. We're sorry about the help that wasn't given and the workers who died, but we were children."

"And what are you now?" There was a cold edge in Khaireldin's voice. Colonel Shaffi answered Khaireldin's question. "Pretenders."

The conversation was beyond our control. Colonel Shaffi continued. "You carry backpacks and wear old clothes. You buy cheap passage and stay in hostels. But our struggle is just an adventure that you take photos of. Even our most illiterate farmer knows that you will go home to cars and televisions and big houses." Though dark had descended, Colonel Shaffi still wore his sunglasses.

"It is a sensitive issue with the Colonel," Khaireldin explained. "Americans are so casual about having everything that the whole world wants. So casual they give away bombs to our enemies to destroy the little that we do have."

They were silhouettes, dark shapes against a slightly less dark sky. There were no lights back at the ramshackle village and the train had switched off. Carol had taken my

hand again and the back of hers was against my thigh. "Neither one of us is a Rockefeller," she said.

"But in your movies, everyone is," Khaireldin said, "and that's what we see. Your movies. Easy money, easy women, easy lives." He paused. "Like you, Miss Carol. Like you look to every Muslim who sees you walking with a man not your husband. A shamed woman." Carol's hand tightened. I stiffened. "Muslim girls have been stoned to death just for looking across the street at a man."

"You're taking a lot for granted," I said to Khaireldin.

"No, you are. You're taking a whole culture you don't understand for granted. Don't come further into Egypt. When the war starts, the people will not be forgiving."

"I've got business in Cairo," I said. "It's more important than a war that might not happen."

"War is coming," Colonel Shaffi said. "Tonight, tomorrow, very soon. Your business could cost you your lives."

"But it's my life. Carol can do what she wants, but I'll be on the ferry tomorrow."

Colonel Shaffi spoke quickly in Arabic. "He says that it's your funeral," Khaireldin translated.

"I'm just passing through. I've only taken a transit visa so I can make a fast stop in Cairo. Then I'm on my way again."

"No one will care, no one will ask if you are caught in the street after the bombs come. You will be guilty first and the mobs will tear you apart and throw you in pieces to the crocodiles." Khaireldin and the Colonel turned away, disappearing into the dark, further into Egypt. My memory is of silence and of minutes passing, of Carol's hand in mine, of the lake water pushing just a little higher up the shore.

"Is Cairo really so important?" Carol asked. Her hand slid up my arm to my shoulder.

"Yes."

"Why? You've never really said."

"It's an official letter, a last hope."

"It can catch up to you somewhere else. Ask Khaireldin to see that it's forwarded."

"No." Carol was close; I leaned to her and we kissed. I felt her soften, but she pushed slowly away.

"We can go back south. Down to Kampala and then west across Africa and up to Morocco and Spain. We'll have fun and be a long, long way from wars that are no concern of ours."

"But all that way waiting, wondering in what town I'll finally get the letter, trusting that Khaireldin sent it, trusting that some backwater post office hasn't trash-canned it when right now I'm just days away from getting it. I won't back away, Carol."

"But why not?"

"Because I want to get on with my life."

They were words I would use again, years later, capitulating to no one but myself in a US military office in Bangkok. Carol and I had been long apart by then. But now she turned, her back to me, and as I circled her with my arms, she leaned against me, looking out over the darkened lake.

"I'll come with you,"" she said.

"You don't have to."

"I know I don't have to. But if I don't, we might never get a chance to make love. Those long, slow kisses sounded so good."

I half turned, looking in the direction Khaireldin and Colonel Shaffi had gone, wondering how far they had walked. We had a thousand miles of empty desert at our backs, but there was no place safe to tryst.

Chapter Nine

A Sunday hence the streets of Egypt would erupt in riots. But at the railhead that night we sat among small groups of Arabs gathered at hookahs, the tobacco strong as we listened to the wail of a balladeer on someone's short-wave radio. Little oil lamps smoked and made orange flickers in the night. This night, these strangers unthinkingly received us into the hospitality of their water pipes and conversation, and as unthinkingly, a few days later, we were to be recipients of a holy surge of rage from their compatriots, people no more nor less strangers to each other than we all had been when we camped that night on the sand. In rage, they would not pause to ponder questions of guilt or innocence. Righteousness does not demand debate, only victims.

So another of the enigmas of those turbulent years was now to have its brief hour. For a moment the world's pace would quicken, its attention shift, and disparate nations, disparate lives would be flung in counterpoint. America, land of every instant gratification - instant coffee, instant diapers, instant rewind - reacted to the war in Vietnam with ponderous apathy in the early years, driving a whole generation to disaffection, protest, rebellion and even exile while pouring its wealth into the cliches of guns and butter. Egypt, however, raced with fury in the space of an hour. Yet neither furor nor apathy availed. Both countries tasted defeat. Both still abide. So we drifted to sleep that night in the ancient desert, the violence of those years once more about to change the course of lives. But the prospect of Carol, the promise of her kiss, the tension of anticipation - it seemed to me that the peaceful oasis of a Rudolph Valentino movie would surely soon flicker across the landscape of our romance. Even in war there is time for lovemaking. Especially in war.

At dawn, the ferry loaded. Carol and I were among the passengers who climbed to the top deck to make the journey in the open air. The ferry's single first-class stateroom was taken by Khaireldin and Colonel Shafii, but they, too, spent most of their time on the open deck. The canvas awning was stretched across the gridwork with the first sign of the sun; beneath the awning's shade we watched the walls of the Nile Valley glide by. Nothing grew on the shore. Rock cliffs rose straight up from the waterline and sand drifted down these cliffs to fill their crevices and crannies.

The sharp, sudden line of desert, rock and water sent upward wavering lines of heat. Carol had moved out from under the awning into the morning sun. "Is she impetuous or foolish?" Khaireldin was back at conversation with a long loaf of thin bread in one hand and a glass of tea in the other. The paddlewheels splashed below us on each side.

"You spend ten years to build a dam that is supposed to make countryside as bleak as this bloom and you ask if Carol's impetuous?" I answered. We were sitting on one of the benches that ringed the perimeter of the top deck.

Khaireldin pointed the fingerlike loaf of bread at Carol. "She seems to think she can bloom in this sun."

"There's a difference between getting a suntan and trying to grow crops."

"True," Khaireldin said. He tore the end off the loaf and offered it to me. "Plants don't get sunstroke." We had talked no more of the warning Khaireldin and Colonel Shafii had given us on the dark lakeshore. In the constant throb of the engines I felt Cairo minute by minute drawing closer. Cairo lured me forward, and the miles and miles of slow journeying seemed narrowing at last towards a resolution.

At night, the awning was rolled back. Carol and I lay beside each other stretched out on the deck. For the first time since I had left America, a future other than wandering was

taking shape in my mind. "How about Sweden?" I asked Carol. "Is that on your list of places to see?"

"No. Not this list, at least. Why?" We were close together and her voice was almost a whisper.

"They give safe haven to draft resisters. I could go there."

"And you want me to go with you? Is that your question?"

"They've got nice fiords. Don't you want to see them?" By then it was late. The other passengers had lapsed into sleep, the hookahs were put away, and the oil lamps extinguished. A meteor streaked across the sky, and then another.

"Look. There!" We both pointed upwards together.

"'There's another one," Carol said. It came in very low and streaked northward with a wide, glowing tail. Khaireldin spoke from a bench several feet away. "We say that every time a star falls, someone dies. And every time a baby's born, a new star lights up in the sky." A meteor shower came then, dozens of sharp, brilliant streaks swarming across the sky. "The fireworks of Allah," Khaireldin called them. The shower faded swiftly, but long after Khaireldin retired to his stateroom, random meteors crisscrossed through the desert stars. Carol and I watched and fell into a long silence. She had not answered my question, but then, I had not answered hers. I called her name softly, but she, too, had drifted into sleep. For a long time I lay awake, watching the thin moon swing to the zenith of its nightly course and start the arc of its descent.

Sleep would not come that night. I rose and picked my way carefully through the dozing passengers to the deck railing, then walked around the wheelhouse to the stern. The wake that bred and broke behind us was almost indiscernible, and I wondered if the resolution to my months and miles of journeying was to be no more than one long trip to the post office.

I had appeared before my draft board before I left. The chairman had been an old man wearing a Veterans of Foreign Wars hat. He listened to me state that I objected to war. Then the old man had hunched his thinness towards me and flashed a smile to the other members. "If your grandmother," he began, and wove his way through a complex question about a hypothetical grandmother being locked in a glass gas chamber while a grinning Nazi reached for the button that would annihilate her. I was a hypothetical marksman with a hypothetical rifle. Would I shoot? "Vietnam is not hypothetical," I had answered. "Vietnam is a real war and I have real objections. You have them in front of you in writing."

"And you'll get our decision in writing, too," the old man answered. "One-A, by god." He had not bothered to poll the other members, but none showed any disagreement. "You'll have your draft notice in thirty days." I had not waited. They were the same men who would decide on the final appeal I had forwarded from Nairobi, and traveling northward up the Nile, I did not need the letter to know their decision. And yet, the letter drew me on. To be a draft resister, one needed official recognition. America does not permit a statement to be made unless one also becomes a recognized government statistic.

Above and behind me, a noise drew my attention. A deckhand had leaped to the flat roof of the wheelhouse and was spreading a prayer mat. While I watched, he knelt and bowed and rose with the rhythm of a lifetime's practice. I did not know if he was saying the last orisons of the old day, or the first prayers of a new day. He completed his obeisance, then glanced at me as he rolled up his prayer mat. He greeted me as he jumped down. "*Sabah al-khair, sayyed*."

"So a new day begins," I answered.

He laughed. "It will be the same as yesterday, the same as tomorrow. In the desert, all days are the same."

"Doesn't anything separate one day from the next for you?"

"Only the night. The moon always changes. Sometimes big, sometimes *hilal*.

"And the days?"

"They are all hot. Only sometimes I leave the boat to visit my cousins in Luxor."

"Is Luxor far?"

"A short ride on the train. I can go in the morning and come back to embark with the ferry the next day."

"Do you go often?"

"Oh, yes. Luxor is very beautiful." He offered me a cigarette and we smoked and talked. "There is a great temple there, Karnak. Also, the tombs of the pharaohs. They go deep under the ground. The pharaohs had a great city at Luxor."

"Maybe I'll stop on my way to Cairo."

"Come with me on the train. I will tell you how to see Luxor. It is the most beautiful."

"Most beautiful of what?"

"Of places, *sayyed*. Of places." The cigarettes burned down and the man turned to his tasks. When I finally returned to Carol to sleep, dawn was already touching the sky. She had shifted during my absence, and one leg lay across my sleeping bag. I dozed on a bench, not disturbing her.

Food was again a problem. The ship's canteen, a simple padlocked cupboard on the underdeck, had only stale bread and tea for sale. Carol dunked a piece of the small, crusty loaf I had bought for her into the sugar-laden tea. The bread dissolved in the glass before she could pull it out. "Eggs, eggs!" she said. "Give me eggs. Even without salt." She tossed the inedible loaf overboard. It floated calmly a few seconds, then suddenly began bouncing up and down in the water. Fish were hitting it from beneath.

We watched Carol's bread get pulled apart by the feeding fish, then I gave her half of my loaf and we began to break off small pieces and throw them to the fish. More fish gathered and a few of the bigger ones began to leap partly out of the water to nab the bread morsels.

"Americans wonder why no one likes them," Khaireldin said from behind us. His uniform still held its creases.

"It wasn't the first question on my mind," Carol said. "How about you, Paul?"

"I think it was the second. The first is how do you keep those creases so sharp? Everything else out here wilts,"

Khaireldin was bent on making his point. "Who else would waste food throwing it to fish in front of so many people? Who but Americans?"

"We're luring the fish in," Carol said. "Pretty soon we'll get one caught in the paddlewheel and when it flips up, we're going to grab it and we'll have a real breakfast."

"There's a fine fish restaurant in Aswan," Khaireldin said. "If we make the customs point before five, you must be my guests."

"What happens if we don't make it before five?" I asked.

"You'll have to stay on the boat until customs opens again in the morning. There's not enough border traffic to stay open for a night shift."

"Carol and I've been talking about taking the train straight up to Luxor. One of the crew members said he'd show us what to see."

"Colonel Shafii and I are also continuing to Luxor, but we have business in Aswan town first. In Luxor you must try the Modern Karnak Restaurant. Perhaps I will see you there. It is very close to the hostel where most travelers like you stay."

"If the Modern Karnak has ice water, it's a date," Carol said. I glanced quickly at her, remembering how Mclntyre had pressed a smaller opening in the bar that night. Despite our evolving romance, I barely knew Carol; our most memorable experience had been a night of chattering teeth in a gusty storm. The instinct to lay claim on another is so strong, our right to do so, so tenuous. I remembered this moment after Carol and I saw each other in those final days in California and I returned to exile. I had feared those words of invitation, not with high fear, but with apprehension, though I think now they saved my life.

We passed Abu Simbel late in the afternoon. To escape the rising waters of the lake, its ancient façade had been raised far up the west wall of the valley; here the lake drew in narrow, and the cliff walls loomed high up over our boat. Above the cliffs, the sky was deep blue and cloudless. The air was still. A hundred feet above the waterline the temple entrance was a dark, oblong hole flanked by four towering stone guardians. The seated, head-dressed figures, two each aside the temple's entrance, stared down on us as the helmsman took the ferry close in for the passengers to see this monument of the long ago dead. There was no escaping the message of those mammoth sentinels carved deep into the solid rock. Whomsoever observed them, from any century, was insignificant. The water grew deeper beneath us as the valley narrowed even more, and we came at dusk to the dam. The ferry's paddlewheels stopped.

The anchor went down and the boat floated a hundred feet from shore, the customs point closed. Shortly, a rowboat put out from a wooden dock that had above it a hand-painted sign in black letters, "Immigration." One man rowed, another in an officer's uniform sat in the stern. A few swallows dived in the evening air. Leaning at the railing watching the boat draw near, we heard noise below and looked down to see Khaireldin and Colonel Shafii directing the removal of their baggage from the stateroom. Khaireldin looked up as they waited by the gangplank that was being lowered by two of the crew members. "Do be careful," he called.

"Good luck in the war," I called back. "Don't forget to duck." But it was the wrong thing to say. Khaireldin's face went hard and Colonel Shafii turned his sunglassed eyes on us one last time. "Whoops," I whispered to Carol. "Say something to cheer them up. They must be pretty important to have a boat sent out."

"Don't forget our dinner date in Luxor," Carol called. "The Modern Karnak, right?" It was not quite what I wanted her to say.

Chapter Ten

The gold and glory of King Tut, the grandeur of Ramses, the splendor of dynasty -- the old clerk at the Modern Karnak Hotel & Restaurant spread these before us in pamphlets as if an apology for the room he was not quite ready to proffer to Carol and me. We had cleared customs early that Saturday morning, pausing in Aswan only long enough to eat, then catching the morning train to Luxor.

We arrived at noon. We both had marked Luxor's student hostel on our maps as the place to stay. "Let's not go there," Carol said. "The description says it's just barracks-style rooms and they separate men and women."

"How about balustrades and balconies, courtyards with hanging baskets of nasturtiums, alabaster arabesques," - I was reading aloud from Carol's guide book - "and the smoke of kebab rising from the narrow windows of ancient, hidden kitchens in an interior courtyard?"

Carol smiled and took my arm as she moved close to read with me. "How about making love, too? Does it include that?"

"Under the casablanca ceiling fan and a big, lacy mosquito net," I answered. "Kisses all day." Her fingers where they gripped my arm made a slow caress.

Carol skipped to the end of the overwritten passage where the hotel name leapt out in bold print after the long description. "Look - it's the Modern Karnak," she said. The Modern Karnak's old clerk would have been a middle-aged man during the waning years the British still held Egypt as a colony. He spoke with a clipped London accent.

"But why can't we have the room now? The hotel is half-empty," I protested to him. We were sitting on a long veranda facing the Nile, at an ironwork table with a glass top. Carol had kicked off her sandals to cool her feet on the shaded quarry tile. The yard sloped down, and over the low wall of the long veranda, we could see the great river gliding by, broad, straight and strong, reflecting back the cloudless blue sky. A narrow, manicured lawn shaded by date palms ran along the riverside, between the street and the bank that dropped down to the water's edge. In one direction, up the street, were buildings, shops and commerce. In the other direction, further along the street, the ancient ruins of Karnak waited. But the hotel faced out to the Nile and to a ferry dock, sited straight at the tall, brown cliffs on the other side. Into those barren cliffs, Egypt's pharaohs had dug deep and made of themselves splendiferous time capsules, travelers who emerged not into brilliant heavens, but into the musty museums of colonial Europe.

"Oh, the hotel is far more vacant than half-empty," the clerk told us. "With this war business about, all the tours have been canceled. We've only a few Russian guests up from working on the dam." He looked along the veranda where far down, three heavyset blond men sat drinking beer and eating sliced cucumbers.

"Will there really be a war?" Carol asked.

"War doesn't come when you expect it," the clerk said. "The whole country is preparing. So I think it is just more politics. I served with Lord Montgomery, you know. I was at El Al-Amein." He sighed, the badge of his service against the Germans in North Africa a distant claim meant to sanctify his doubts about the pending war with Israel. "But it is the war preparations that make it so I cannot give you a room. You haven't registered with the police yet." He was looking at our passports. "It is a temporary law -

hotels must ascertain that all foreign guests are registered at the local police station. Usually the tour companies do it in advance for the guests."

“How long will it take?"

"It is a formality only. But now it is lunch time. You cannot register at the police station until after lunch."

"If it's only a formality…?" but the clerk was not going to give in. He had called to a boy standing inside the lobby near the front desk, and the boy had brought the tourist brochures that were now spread before us. "You can go see some of the sites, and I'll send the boy to the police station with your passports. By tea-time, your room will be available."

"What about our packs? Can we leave them here?" The old man brightened at my question.

"Oh, certainly. Those I can put in your room right away. There is no requirement to register baggage." He leaned close. "I am giving you a room far away from the Russians. They sing when they get drunk. Guests have complained."

"Is it a room with a big, slow ceiling fan and one of those huge mosquito nets that drops all around the bed like a canopy?" Carol asked.

"Exactly," the clerk said. "Just like when the British were here. During the Empire, the *Queen of the Nile* docked right out here on the run from Cairo." He pointed to the ferry dock. "The rooms were always full and all my sons had work. But the Russians…" - he left the sentence unfinished. "They can't even speak English." His attention returned to the brochures. "I recommend the Valley of the Kings - the tombs of the pharaohs. Any tourists that might be in town will already be farther along in their tour. You can see the tombs without being bothered at this time of day. No tourists, no touts."

We rented bicycles from the hotel concession and crossed the Nile on a tow rope ferry that looked just big enough to accommodate a small tour bus. On the far side rose the walls of squat canyons. There the kings and queens and lords of vanished dynasties had, on high bluffs hewn from the scorched rock, held their courts of power, and in vast underground caverns that tunneled deep into the earth had shaped the trappings of eternity. Piles of dust and tailings from those ancient excavations still lay at the base of the valley walls and the only breath of breeze was an occasional dervish that whirled through the brown, fallow fields beside the asphalt pavement we pedaled upon.

Scattered randomly through this checkerboard of neglected rice paddies stood stone sphinxes and carved sentinels with nothing to protect; whatever forgotten gods and gates they once stood guard before in servile tribute had proved less enduring than had their sculptured minions. Around one curve we pedaled past the high court where Akhenaten once proclaimed allegiance to the sun; at another a road turned up a second, smaller canyon to the Valley of the Queens. In occasional spots of shade, souvenir stalls hunkered, boarded closed and deserted without the tourists.

"Egypt must be why the English invented sun helmets," Carol said. Her hair was wrapped in her blue bandana and she wore dark, large-rimmed sunglasses. The bright sunlight threw the deep tan of her skin into hard contrast with her white shirt and shorts.

"Canteens, too," I said. "We should've brought water." The road took a steeper angle up and progress became harder. I have still the impression of slowly churning legs and the gradual passage of asphalt beneath my bicycle tires as I kept my eyes down to

avoid the glare of the sun while the valley walls closed in and the heat rose with our effort to make the summit of the rise. Carol reached it first and stopped. We stared down into the Valley of the Kings, burial ground of men who postured as gods and who ordered tombs be carved as magnificent as the status they pretended to. But it was not the tombs that drew our attention.

"Up there," Carol said. "Look up there." She pointed to a tiny bluff on the back wall of the canyon. Perched there was a modern building of glass and brick with "Tourist Restaurant" painted in bold blue letters across its awning.

"Ice water," I said. "Lemonade. Cold beer, maybe." We pushed the bikes over the summit and let them coast down, gathering speed on the descent and passing into the shadow of the great western wall of the canyon. "Air conditioning," Carol called from in front of me. "I'11 bet you a coke they have air conditioning." The hot wind of riding, fanned by our speed, was in our faces like air from a furnace vent. We rounded the curve that branched up the little bluff to the restaurant and coasted in under the awning.

The restaurant was empty. Abandoned. Plastic tables with folding chairs were neatly spaced outside along the shaded side of the building; inside, too, we found only empty tables. There was not even a counterman. The door to the kitchen was open, but not waiter, cook nor manager appeared. From behind the building came the throbbing stroke of a generator, but if there was air conditioning, it was turned off. We served ourselves from a refrigerator stacked with soft drinks and went outside to sit under the awning, looking down at the entrances of the tombs.

"Maybe there really is going to be a war," Carol said. "Why else would this place be deserted?"

"The generator's still running. Someone must be around somewhere." I noticed electric lines running down from the bluff to the tombs, which on the outside were no more than squarely cut, black holes in the base of the canyon walls. There were only hand-painted wooden signs to differentiate the entrance to a tomb of a Ramses, a Menes or a Tutankhamen.

"Where do we start?" Carol asked. "And does it matter?"

"I've always liked the name Ramses," I said. We took bottles of cold mineral water from the refrigerator, left some money on the counter and went down to a tomb. Whether it was that of a Ramses II, a IV or a VI, I no longer remember, nor do I care. We stepped through the entrance and the rock leaped alive with pictures, rendered in bright reds, blues, and yellows. In the glare of the bare light bulbs strung down the long first passageway, a thousand hieroglyphs painted the story of the great king's life. Or perhaps it was a thousand thousand. Every millimeter of wall and ceiling was covered, painted, lettered and styled, the funeral book of a man larger than life. The tunnel took a sharp cut downward and we descended on broad steps of hewn rock.

The shaft ran on and on, down and down. Our descent was slow. The hieroglyphs on the painted walls displayed their tales as freshly as at the time four thousand years previous those long ago artists entered them there. The silence was so deep that even the hum of the electric through the filaments of the bare bulbs was audible.

"I can't help thinking," Carol said, "that for every one of Khaireldin's and the Colonel's workers who died building the dam, a hundred must have died here." The tomb was cool, and we descended yet another flight of steps, emerging this time into a vaulted

antechamber. Unlit torches were rammed into holes drilled in the walls at each end of the long room. A small plaque explained the Egyptians' system of lighting with pitch and torch. A stone jar contained a sample of the pitch. “It must’ve been smoky working down here,” I said, but Carol had pushed on.

The antechamber opened into a final vault, a vast oblong chamber in the center of which the pharaoh's sarcophagus had lain in state and splendor on a central podium. The podium was a cube of black rock, smoothed, polished and shiny, and placed at the exact center of the enormous room.

"My god," Carol said, looking up, but her voice disappeared into the immense silence of that deep chamber. The hieroglyphs of the long stairwell down had finished the telling of that Ramses’ life. Within the burial chamber, the walls were midnight blue, and up and up on the two ends of the chamber, story after story, rose golden figures, naked, giant and proud, their enormous feet filling the base of the walls on two sides of the room. Their hips were narrow, and from their swelling chests their thrust-out arms twirled, casually it seemed, suns and moons and stars. They bent forward across the cambered ceiling, their heads crowned, their dark eyes staring down directly over the pharaoh's abandoned dais.

Hand in hand Carol and I walked forward, in silence, in awe, in love, and alone. We kissed. We touched. We lay upon the stone dais, the rock cold against our pressing limbs. We hesitated, we surged. We abandoned clothes, and the tracks of her lips on my flesh are as fresh and vivid today in memory as were the colors of those ancient, painted figures staring down upon our sweet discoveries.

Carol cleaved to me, her hair as she arched above me cascading down the slopes of her breasts, and I lay between the soft succor of her body and the cold, hard rock. Her thighs like fishes thrust, and the cries of her moment burst the silence of the vault and echoed back at us from the guardian gods glowering down.

We loved again; and we loved more. We drowsed, we talked. We laughed and loved and slept again. Carol woke first. "Paul." We lay on the dais, exhausted. "Paul." Her hand clutched my arm. "The lights are out."

I opened my eyes. The darkness was total. "Paul, I don't like this." I turned towards Carol and put my arm across her, her breasts soft beneath my forearm. I felt her shiver, and still only half awake, not yet grasping the implications of the darkness, my urge was to kiss her. She shivered again.

"Are you cold, Carol?"

"No. I’m scared."

"Maybe it's night outside. No one was around to see us come in here. They could have turned the generator off."

"Who? There was no one up there to turn it off."

"Perhaps it ran out of fuel. How long did we sleep?"

"I don't know. After love like that, hours maybe."

"So let’s just make more love and wait. The lights will come back on again sometime."

But Carol's body did not soften with my suggestion. She was silent for a few moments. "I can't, Paul. I'm scared. It's like those gods or whatever those are that are painted up there on the ceiling are going to reach down and toss us around like those suns and moons they're juggling. It's silly, but I'm really scared."

"But it’s so dark, we can't even find our clothes." After several minutes I remembered the torches in the antechamber. "If we can find my shirt," I said, “we'll get my cigarette lighter and then light those torches. They might last long enough to get us out of here."

The feeble glow of the cigarette lighter when we retrieved my shirt was a little ball of orange that could not penetrate that thick black even to our feet. We walked carefully to the wall, then felt our way around the edge until we found the entrance back into the antechamber. Carol dipped and swabbed one of the torches in the jar of pitch and I touched flame to it. The torch caught and cast a spluttering ruddiness into the antechamber. We returned to the dais, searching for our clothes. "Look up," Carol said. She had found a sandal; it dangled in her hand next to her naked thigh. The torchlight at its brightest just reached the ceiling, then receded as the torch faded and brightened, faded and brightened. In the wax and wane of the light, the ceiling was alive with suns and moons and stars catching the glow, reflecting pinpoints of light back and then flickering out, as if the great guardians really did juggle the heavens in their hands. ""They're different this way." Carol said.

"Yes," I agreed. "They're friendly gods now." The hard, dark walls had disappeared in the blackness and the bodies of the gods painted upon them shone with a golden luminescence, friendly gods striding forth from midnight to parcel out the universe. We watched the gods dance and then Carol began to sing.

Her voice was high but she sang her song softly. In one hand I held the flickering torch, with the other arm I held Carol. She sang and we danced, a sandal in her hand, and the planets above us whirled round and round.

Chapter Eleven

When we emerged from the tomb in those first hours of the war, Egypt was already reeling in stunned defeat, its high hopes and bravado pummeled into empty rhetoric by Israel's air force. It was early, it was Sunday, and Egypt was hammered into the ground. Far to the north of us, sunrise air strikes had in hours proved Akhenaten's dusty pledge to Ra an impotent talisman against the shriek of jets, the clusters of bombs and the flashes of napalm. The great sun god shined down, and by his light, the attackers had preyed with relentless accuracy on their targets.

The only swift reaction in Egypt that morning was a leap of frenzy as franticly exaggerated war rumors spread throughout the nation. But they did not reach to our deserted valley. We coasted back towards Luxor on our bicycles, the road mostly downhill, early morning lovers with no concerns but a return to the hotel for a cool shower and a pleasant breakfast.

At the Nile, the ferry was on the far side and there was no attendant to come across and transport us. The voice of an imam calling from a minaret floated across the river, wild and excited. It was not a prayer; I should have noticed. "There's a little boat tied up down here," Carol said. "We could row across in it and send the hotel boy back for the bikes." She was standing at the edge of the ferry landing and pointing down a short ladder. We climbed down to the boat, and found only one paddle stowed below the board seats.

The Nile was too strong for my meager oarsmanship. The current pushed the little boat downstream and I could not make straight headway against it. Only when we reached the gentler current on the Luxor side was I able to paddle straight for the shore. We beached well below the ferry dock, then walked along a sandy path, pulling the boat by its bow rope until we found a place to tie it up. We were at the bottom of a slight embankment, and the harangue from the mosque, turned to full volume, was booming and frenzied. At first I did not understand. But pausing to tie the boat up, some of the words came through. Carol was already up at the roadway.

"Carol, wait," I called. "He keeps saying *jihad, jihad*." Carol turned, puzzled. I ran up the bank to her. "It means war." I glanced along the street towards the Modern Karnak. In every building at every window, figures leaned out listening to the imam's holy tirade. "Quick," I said. "Get to the hotel."

Then the frenzied imam paused his call to *jihad*, and I heard shouts.

"Foreign spies."

"Jews."

Two men vaulted from a ground floor window at a building further along the embankment. I pushed Carol ahead of me and began to run, my hand in her back propelling her. The hotel was almost a block distant, more people were filling the street. The two men from the window were angling across the street, racing to cut us off. In front of Carol, a stone skidded across the roadway, then a second stone cracked into the pavement between my feet and skittered off. The shouts had raced beyond us from house to house, window to window.

"Spies. Spies. Saboteurs!"

The yelling was being thrown back and forth along the street. Doorways were opening. People were pouring out, their kaftans flapping between their legs, their turbans half wound and streaming behind them as they began converging on us. Something hard thudded into my side. I grabbed at the pain and looked ahead to the hotel. The old clerk was waving to us from the veranda, one of the great wooden doors of the lobby entrance half open.

And we almost made it.

Only a fat lady in the hotel yard, middle-aged, shouting, and moving faster than her varicose legs could have carried her in years, really had a chance of stopping us. More stones flew by, some high, some low, but none that did not hit us making any difference. I charged around Carol and thrust my arm straight into the fat woman's face. Pain coursed upward through my elbow to the shoulder; the fat lady toppled backwards. Carol dodged around her and gained the veranda, but the fat woman was on the ground in front of me. I leaped across her, she rolled, and one foot came down in her soft belly. I saw the old clerk grab Carol and thrust her inside as I stumbled. A stone slammed into the back of my head, my free foot pushed and I went face down on the sidewalk. The mob was on me, with their feet, their fists, their curses. I was lifted up, I was thrown down, and I was slammed into unconsciousness.

I ached. The windowless cell in which I awoke was made of stone. I felt its hardness through the straw pallet on which I lay. I was stripped to my shorts and the pallet had no sheet. Stalks of straw stuck through against my skin. I moved to relieve the itch of the straw, and the aches became pain, everywhere.

I rolled slowly off the pallet and lay face down, letting the cool stone floor soothe the hurt and pain. Years later, in California, I would learn that Carol had saved my life that morning, but when on the floor of that cell I moved my lips to say her name, cuts cracked open and began to trickle blood. One shoulder felt as if it had been stretched from its socket and popped back in again. Bruises covered my body.

After an hour I stood up. Pain shot up my right leg from the base of my heel. I leaned forward until my hands touched the floor to take the weight off my foot, and balanced thus, I hobbled to the steel cell door. The Judas hole was open. I put my eye to it. "Help," I said.

Outside was a corridor of ten or twelve cells, but only mine had a solid door. My cell was at the very end of the corridor. A guard sat at the opposite end under a sign that read, "Exit". The exit door was also solid metal. I called again. The guard looked in my direction, then walked towards my cell. He was young and thin with a narrow mustache. A nightstick hung from his belt. It was too much effort to move my eye away from the Judas hole when he stared in. "Please," I said.

The guard said something in Arabic that I did not try to comprehend, then walked away. I watched until he went out the exit, then slid down beside the cell door and waited on the stone floor. Eventually the lock turned and an old warder entered with a tray. He bent over me. One upper front tooth was turned half sideways in his gums. "Tea will give you strength," he said. He was a gentle man who held a metal cup to my mouth and understood the pain when the hot tin touched my mashed lips.

"Wait." He left the cell, a small man in a white shirt that bagged at the waist and with arms that looked weak sticking out of the short sleeves, the biceps undefined and the

elbows knobby, the wrists almost delicate. He came back with an ointment that he rubbed on my lips. "Now try again." Thus I was cared for for two days. The old man could tell me only that I was in the jail's single maximum security cell, and that I had been brought there beaten and unconscious.

"All the doctors have been called north to the bombing," he told me. "Besides, the hospital is too dangerous for you. The people might come and kill you. They killed some non-believers in the north."

He sat with me while I ate the food he brought morning and evening, but talking hurt my lips. Mostly I slept, waking often to the long harangues that blared from the nearest mosque, understanding enough to know that a state of war still existed. But until Khaireldin appeared, I thought only occasionally about Carol. I had more immediate pain. A molar was loose in the back of my mouth and I could not keep my tongue away from checking again and again whether it was healing or about to be lost. The warder brought the news of Khaireldin's visit with breakfast on the morning of the third day. "Someone's coming today." He dipped my bread into the tea to soften the crust. "A high official."

"Can I have my clothes?"

"There is no authorization for your clothes."

"I don't want to be questioned without my clothes." Bruises had turned ugly up and down my body, the discoloration had a greenish cast around the black and the bruises pained anytime anything touched them. "Please ask if I can be allowed my clothes."

The warder left. I ate the bread slowly, trying to avoid the loose molar and wondering what the questions would be. Anything I could say seemed very foolish. I had walked into a war. Why? To get a letter. An important letter? Yes. Oh? Important to me.

Carol had been right. I could have had the letter forwarded a dozen places. I heard doors open and close, but I stayed away from the Judas hole. My heel still hurt. I could think of nothing to say that would make my story more plausible. I wondered if the very shallowness of my innocence would arouse suspicion. I had been questioned once by the FBI - an agent in a yellow and blue striped shirt had come to my room after a college peace demonstration.

"You were at the headquarters office of the demonstration most of the day," he said after identifying himself.

"I don't have anything to tell you," I said. The demonstration, early in the war, had been small and few had attended. Several of us involved in organizing it had spent the late afternoon trying to talk ourselves into believing it was a success.

"Any information could be valuable," the agent said. Behind the FBI agent standing in my apartment doorway, the early evening sky was fluffy with clouds and flowers were blooming.

"I was just on my way out," I said, and it was true enough. I had a date to go to a movie.

"I'll only keep you a minute, I just want some basic information." I noticed the agent did not have a note pad or pen.

"I have nothing to say," I said and realized that I did not. There had been no arrests. My statement to the agent hid nothing. The demonstration had even had a permit. The

encounter with the establishment had all been quite polite. I closed the door and walked past the FBI man feeling somehow a failure.

"Who else was at the office with you?'" he asked, trailing just a step behind me.

“Just me," I said, almost hoping he would fling at me the names of some of the other people with whom I had spent the afternoon’s post-mortem.

"That’s all I needed to know," the agent said. "Thanks for taking the time to talk with us." I went to the movie with a girl who had been at the demonstration, and a few hours later she introduced me to marijuana. Getting stoned, I realized with youth’s silly satisfaction that for the future, the drug experience gave me something to hide from the FBI. "Whatever he wrote in his report," I said to my date that evening, "he must have made it up. I bet that's how everything's got so messed up in the first place. The government can write anything they want about people. How would we ever know?" That is a nice time in our lives, when palliatives can so precisely alleviate the little upsets of our day.

Khaireldin came in with a clipboard, the old warder behind him. I started to stand up. "I didn't know it would be you," I said. "How's the war going?"

"Badly." He motioned for me to stay seated. His eyes played over my injuries. "About as badly for Egypt as you look. Unfortunately, it has not been safe to take you to a hospital."

"I don't think anything's broken. The warder's been very kind."

"Then if you'll answer a few questions, perhaps we can get you out of here. Please answer them truthfully. We already have a statement from Miss Carol.'"

"Is she okay?'"

"She was when she left." Khaireldin was standing close to the pallet; he raised the clipboard so that looking up, I could not see his face. "You did not stay in your hotel room Saturday night. Correct?"

"Correct. Carol left? Where did she go?"

"I have no idea," Khaireldin said. "We were ordered to send all Americans to Cairo for trans-shipment out of the country. It was arranged through your consulate. You were in no shape to make the journey, unfortunately."

"But when did she go? How many days has it been?"

Khaireldin peered over the clipboard. "She went the day after the bombing. Now if we can get on with the questions, I can get my report on you filed." He went back behind the clipboard. "Where did you stay that night?"

"In the tombs."

"Which tomb?"

"One of the Ramses, I think. I don’t know the number."

"Describe it."

"Suns, moons. Two figures juggled them. They bent over the top of the ceiling and stared down."

The clipboard tilted and one eye became visible. "'Please remember that a state of war exists. Any foreigner can be imprisoned for the duration or tried for espionage. You must give exact answers."

"I'm trying. We only visited one tomb. The lights went out and it was morning before we found our way back up." I wondered what details Carol had told him of our night in the tomb.

"You spent the whole night in the dark in the tomb? What did you do all that time?"

I stared at the clipboard as I answered. "We made love." I saw the old warder look swiftly at Khaireldin. Khaireldin asked the next question. "Why were you going to Cairo?"

"I'm expecting a letter there at the American Express."

"The American Express is closed."

"But…?" The certitude I had felt on the Aswan ferry that my life was working towards a resolution was shattered. "What about the mail there?" Khaireldin did not answer. "Can you get my letter for me?" I asked. Khaireldin made a final penstroke and lowered the clipboard. I saw the tired face of a military officer attending to the minor duties of a lost war.

"You still don't understand," he said.

"Understand what?"

"You're a prisoner. Not a welcome one, but a prisoner all the same. Any American who did not transport out of the country within twenty-four hours of the war is in custody. Your country supplies our enemy with weapons even while our enemy attacks us. You, personally, defile our proud monuments with your selfish pleasures. I should have let the mob hang you."

"You rescued me?"

"My friend, the hotel manager, called me. He said his guest, Miss Carol, asked specifically for my help."

"I don't know what to say. Thank you." I could think of nothing more elaborate. Khaireldin left the cell, the old warder locked up behind him, turning the key sharply in the lock, and I was alone again. No one brought me dinner that day.

Khaireldin appeared again, carrying his clipboard. A week or more had passed. In the isolation of my cell, I lost track of days, and the nights were long. Very long. If the guard did not leave the Judas hole open, the cell was pitch dark, and the call from the mosques, audible via the windows of the other cells, was easy to miss with the Judas hole closed off. The morning call to prayer was my only way of marking the time through the deep dark of those lengthy nights. In the day, at least, the cell's single light was turned on, and I had the warder's morning and evening visits with which to measure the time. But it was only with great difficulty that I controlled a lurking fear - that I was trapped in a place from which I could exit only with the help of others. I did not think my interview, my admission to lovemaking in the ancient tomb, had helped my prospects.

My bruises were healing when Khaireldin came that second time, and I was doing simple exercises to pass the time. "Colonel Shaffi has arranged your release," he said. "You are to be sent to the American representative at the Spanish consulate in Alexandria." I saw clipped to the top of some papers an envelope with an official US government imprint.

"Is that my letter from Cairo?"

"It is from your Selective Service," Khaireldin said. He handed it to me with no apology for the long slit along the top where the letter had been opened. "You've been declared delinquent. The FBI has been instructed to arrest you."

"And you're going to turn me over to the consul?"

"You deserve each other."

"They'll send me to Vietnam - to make war on the people there for no better reason than that America's bigger. They're victims, like Egypt's a victim, of being in the way of what somebody richer wants."

"Everything's been arranged. Prepare to leave." Khaireldin signaled to an aide standing outside the door. The aide stepped inside the cell carrying my pack.

"Just let me go," I said. "I'll go back to Khartoum. I don't want to be part of anyone's war, not yours, not America's, not anybody's." Khaireldin nodded to the aide, who bent promptly to my pack, pulled out some clothes and tossed them at my feet. "You're to be on the train north that leaves in an hour,"' Khaireldin said. "There's a safe carriage no one will enter. Stay in it. You will be met in Alexandria. Don't leave the train carriage for any reason. Outside it, you have no protection."

"What can I say to change your mind?" I asked. "That I was foolish? That I should have listened to you and the Colonel? Or should I say that America's wrong?" Khaireldin was obviously impatient. His war was over, in its place was the national rage that lurked just below the humiliation of having been defeated with the opening shots of the lightening war. I dressed while I talked. "Okay, America's wrong. We shouldn't give weapons to your enemies. But turning me over to the FBI doesn't help any."

"Just to know personally that one American is suffering, just to know that, that helps," Khaireldin said. "Just to hear you ask me for help and to say 'no', that helps."

"I came to Egypt as a friend, not an enemy." I dug in my pack and found an elastic bandage to wrap around the heel that still gave me pain.

"No, you came as a tourist. But you never saw what was right before your eyes. I was right, Colonel Shaffi was wrong."

"About what?"

"Colonel Shaffi thought you were Israeli sympathizers infiltrating as tourists. He observed you finish that bottle of Jewish wine I left on your table in the dining car. I argued that you couldn't be spies. I told him Israeli agents are trained, and that you were both too ignorant of our customs to be anything but tourists. I was right. Israelis are not so oblivious."

I picked up my pack, feeling the same deflated feeling I had felt when the FBI agent had questioned me after the demonstration.

Khaireldin escorted me personally, in his Russian jeep, the three blocks to the train station. Two carriages, painted military green, were separated from the rest of the train by a supply car. One was filling with officers going north, the other was mostly empty. Khaireldin placed me in the emptier carriage. "Don't get out until you are met in Alexandria," he warned again. "There'll be no one to save you a second time."

"Have you heard anything of Carol?" I asked.

"Not since the business at the hotel," he said stiffly. "She left a letter, but in all the confusion, it got lost somewhere."

"If you find it, would you forward it to me?"

“Of course," Khaireldin said. "To American Express, Saigon." It was said with an edge of contempt that slipped through Khaireldin's military persona, a shard of self-satisfaction that he allowed himself at this parting moment. My passage out was only one duty on his list of the day. My Cairo letter had revealed me to him as a shirker, avoiding my country's call, and thus, to him, not doing my duty to God. I was a non-believer, one beyond the prospect of salvation.

"You've done more than you needed to for me," I said. "At least know that I appreciate the help you've given. Thank you for saving me from the mob."

Khaireldin turned and lumbered back to the jeep. I turned to the interior of the carriage. At the far end two Arabs sat dressed in kaftans. I sat on a wide bench seat near the middle facing them. I checked in my pack and noted that nothing was missing, then as the train pulled northwards out of Luxor, I opened the letter that had drawn me into Egypt.

The legal litany of my delinquency was made plain by boldface type in the body of my letter. It highlighted a prison term and a ten thousand dollars fine for not reporting. I felt the too thin wallet of traveler’s checks I had retrieved from my pack and began to laugh. At first my laugh was low and inside and only to myself. Twilight Egypt rolled by, occasional trains sped past at double speed in the opposite direction, and still I laughed. I laughed until night fell and the interior coach lights were turned on, throwing my reflection back at me from all the windows. Seeing myself, unshaven, my clothes wrinkled and needing washing, the ends of my hair curling out uncontrollably, the laughter began to roll out loudly, mirth to applaud the innocent farce into which two wars had turned my life. The two Arabs at the end of the car were watching me as my laughter swelled.

I held up the letter from my draft board. "Ten thousand dollars,” I said. "They want ten thousand dollars.” The two Arabs came forward and I pointed to the boldfaced letters spelling out the penalties. They did not understand. I tried to explain it in Arabic and got it all fouled up. The two men grinned. I tried to say it again, and they began to talk to me. I laughed and they laughed, and we kept talking. They sat, one on each side of me on the bench seat, and one had a thermos of coffee. We shared the coffee and continued to talk, though I do not think we any of us knew for sure if we were talking about the same things.

The train roared northwards to Cairo and once a jolt in the tracks threw coffee onto the robes of one of the Arabs. I grabbed the soiled folds with one hand and with the other used the delinquency notice to wipe away the stains. When I finished we all looked at the official government missive, now with a long brown smear down the middle. I crumpled the letter into a tight ball and threw it to the far end of the car. We laughed together. The letter bounced off a seat back, hit a window, and dropped from my sight forever.

Later we dozed. I awoke as the train slowed. The man to my right had slid my direction in the seat and he leaned heavily against me with his head on my shoulder. His weight had pushed me over onto the man on my left. Huddled together in the empty car, we rode into the great train yards of South Cairo. Almost tenderly, I extricated myself from my companions. They shifted in the seat to lean on each other and went on sleeping. I left the train, circled through the main station, bought a ticket, and caught that morning's express south, back to Aswan.

Chapter Twelve

I fled, though none pursued. But pursuit is not the only reason for flight. Sometimes we flee from our decisions, sometimes we flee to destiny, and if destiny describes too grandiosely the inconsequence of our individual lives, we flee at least to our destinations. America's war in Vietnam raged senselessly on. The fruitless killing escalated, the useless dying mounted, and my draft board posted my delinquent name on a bulletin board outside its office doors. There it yellowed year by year while someone further down the list was inducted in my place. Someone who did what he was told to do, who followed orders wherever they led while my name hung by that door as the paper brittled and I drifted from border to border, confronted rarely with politics in my meandering, but daily with surviving.

I do not recall much discussing the war and politics during most of that period, yet it was always there, in that transitory life subjects that surfaced as an incidental backdrop to my daily concerns. I was to leave Africa soon after Martin Luther King was murdered, spurred onward not by any consequence of that tragedy, but by the collapse of a dismal business relationship with McIntyre. I was passing through the Middle East when Senator Kennedy died from an assassin's attack in California. And on a hot August night in India, I sat on my bunk in the large common room of a dak bungalow in Benares and I listened to Radio Moscow report the Battle of Chicago. Far away from the holy city where I bunked, another city's police rioted and clubbed the spirit of a generation into the hard concrete of the streets outside the convention hall where Democrats in disarray met to choose a candidate to oppose the resurrection of Richard M. Nixon.

Where I bunked that August night, hashish smoke filled the room, mixing with the smell of burning myrrh. The bungalow's caretaker had laid cut marigolds on the broad, plastered windowsills. The shutters were pinned open and the nightlife of India streamed by beyond an iron picket fence twenty feet away. A few candles flickered on the hardback chairs that sat at the foot of each bunk. No one used the chairs, home to legions of tiny red insects that hid in the cane weaving of the seats and bit fiercely when sat upon.

Pipes laden with hashish passed along the common aisle from bed to bed. A few of the travelers sharing that room had opted to pay an extra rupee to rent mattresses, but most of us had simply unrolled our sleeping bags on the bed ropes. Mattresses had fleas. Moscow's commentary, usually flawless, was stilted and unpolished that night as the Soviets rushed to spread the news of Chicago's strife throughout the world. "The demonstrators made a heroic stand in a park of the city," the radio announced, and gave the names of streets, filled with rage, that I do not remember. "For three-score minutes, a brutal police attack was met by repulsers," the commentator droned on. My bunk mates in the long hostel dormitory had drug stashes lying open on the bedposts and wherever a pipe burned out, it was refilled, lit and passed along again. On a bunk across the narrow center aisle from me a German girl was wearing an ankle bracelet, brass bells that jingled when she stretched for the passing pipes. A Swede in the bunk next to mine had shaved his head hairless except for a pigtail, Hindu style. My own scalp was trimmed nearly bald, the result of a job I had stumbled upon in Bombay. An American couple occupied two beds immediately to my right.

"Mass arrests have obtained," the radio reported. "The battering of prisoners is being displayed on television and in the newspapers." Someone yelled something out a front window of that long room. Out at the street, an iron gate squealed open on its old colonial hinges. The German girl's ankle bells jingled. I saw a thin, turbaned Indian come through the gate and approach the narrow veranda that ran along the front windows of the room. On his head, he balanced a wide, shallow wicker basket, in the center of which a tin oil lamp flamed and smoked.

"What's he selling?" the girl on my right asked.

"Peanuts," I said. I passed a pipe to her. She passed one circulating the other direction to me.

"Staff workers were dragged from Senator Gene McCarthy's downtown offices and imprisoned," the radio continued. The Indian peanut merchant ducked and brought his basket down on a windowsill. "Ground-nuts, sahibs? Very roasted."

"How much?" the Swede called. He was bare to the waist, wrapped in a sari, and a small cabochon of polished turquoise, set in gold, hung on a chain at his throat. The gold and turquoise caught the flicker of the peanut merchant's oil lamp; little shafts of light glimmered in the blond hairs of the Swede's chest.

"The heroic Black Panther Party, oppositioning the ruling Democrats, has ultimated the number of demonstrators shot by police at fourteen," the Moscow commentator said.

The Indian vendor held up a cone of nuts wrapped tightly in newspaper. "One rupee," he said.

"Fifty pais," someone yelled. "That's the real price."

"For all, how much?" the Swede said. "How much, the whole basket full?"

"Sahib!" the Indian said.

"Far out," somebody said at the far end of the room. "A whole basket of nuts."

"He's freaking out," another voice said. "He's never sold that much before."

"We make collection. Everybody put one rupee," the Swede said.

"Settle the price first," the girl with ankle bells said.

"Find some music on that radio," somebody yelled.

The Battle of Chicago faded into the Benares night, a distant American drama upstaged by hashish and a basket of nuts. I remember waking early the next morning and walking along narrow, curling streets to the great funeral abutments overlooking the Ganges, the sacred river of India that at Benares intersected with one of Hinduism's holiest cities. A few worshippers were already doing calisthenics on the riverbank, two bony old men meditated side by side, and occasionally someone slipped into the murky river to take a blessed bath. Corpses began to arrive, wrapped in white shrouds and carried by mourners on simple stretcher pallets. These were placed on pyres that were quickly lit, and the oily stench of burning flesh spread in gray clouds of smoke across the dawn sky. I had a pocket full of peanuts that I had intended for breakfast, but the smell turned my stomach and I placed the nuts in an empty food bowl at a little riverside shrine. Turning back once as I left the riverbank, I noticed that monkeys had descended from the roof of the shrine, eager for my offering.

I was in the midst of making a new beginning, again, a year of doing business with McIntyre after my flight from Egypt having proved only marginally profitable. In old movies and romanticized novels, exiles spend their time upon the stage chasing risky

deals, whispering in curtained booths and dreaming of fantastic profits. Bars of government gold, mysterious pouches of diamonds, and documents of immense importance, to be sold at high prices, populate those fantasies. I made my first deal in the Thorn Tree Lounge, a sidewalk café at the New Stanley Hotel in Nairobi. From that spot, when the old Stanley had stood there, Papa Hemingway had mounted safari trips to Kilamanjaro and Britain's colonialists had met to set the prices of coffee, sisal, and animal hides while black waiters in starched uniforms poured endless drinks.

My return south through Egypt to Khartoum, retracing the journey Carol and I had so recently made, mixes in my mind with thoughts of her and with fears of pursuit by the Egyptian police. But both my anticipation of a desperate border crossing and my vague hopes of reuniting with Carol were only fantasies. She had no choice but to accept the safe conduct out of Egypt she had been proffered, and when I arrived safe again at Khartoum, I resigned myself to Khaireldin's statement that she had traveled north with other evacuees. I idled away an evening at the American Club, but none of the few drinkers there could recall anyone named Carol coming recently out of Egypt. No letters awaited me at the American Express. I took the route south from Khartoum to Uganda, following the White Nile this time, and entered into black Africa.

Weeks later, sipping Tusker Lager at the Thorn Tree in Nairobi, I looked up to see McIntyre weaving his way through the tables and discovered that the water wizard saw no harm at all in making a quick buck.

"I remember you," McIntyre called across six tables and a dozen drinkers. "Not your name. But I know you!" His foot caught on the leg of one of the white wicker chairs and he stumbled.

"Excuse me, lady," he said to the chair's occupant and still three tables from where I sat, he began signaling for a waiter to bring more beer. "You were with that sweet little Carol on the Gondar road. That's you, right? Tell me who you are again."

I half considered not doing it. "Paul Rhodes," I said, noticing no particular good feelings at meeting up again with McIntyre.

"What I like about Africa is how you're always running into somebody you know from someplace else. And Africa's so big. You wouldn't think it'd be like that."

"It's not something I dwell on," I said. But it was untrue. On each of the days that I had checked at the American Express offices in Khartoum, in Kampala, and in Nairobi, I had hoped expressly for some message from Carol. That day at the Thorn Tree, at four in the afternoon, I had just come once more from the Nairobi office, and McIntyre was already drunk.

"Beer," McIntyre said to the waiter. "One for him, too. And some of those crunchy things to eat like they got." He pointed to a bowl on a table next to us. "Ever see the little lady again?" I nodded a yes but Mac missed it. He was gazing around at the people in the café. "We went on down to the coast and spent a few days in Massawa getting sunburned. She sure makes a bikini look good."

"I suppose she does."

"Hers was kind of rusty red. Like you see when you hold one of these Tusker Lagers up towards the sun." Mac twisted round to squint at my beer bottle, which he had picked up off the table and held towards the sky.

"It looks more like amber to me," I said.

"No, it's red, like her bikini."

"I never saw her bikini."

"Too bad," Mac said. "It's rusty red. Goes nice with her skin"

"So I gather." The waiter returned with our order and McIntyre put my bottle down.

"Don't know what I was holding that up in the air for. We should be drinking it, not looking at it." Mac grinned, picked up one of the fresh bottles and said, "Here's to you." He took a long swill, then said, "I thought maybe when I saw you sitting here she had come along with you." McIntyre grabbed a handful of the crunchies the waiter had delivered with the beer and popped them into his mouth, but he was watching me now.

"So you could run down to the coast and spend a few more days getting sunburned again?"

"Hey, man. She didn't have to say yes."

"No," I said. "No, she didn't."

"You find your stuff at the hotel okay?"

"I found it."

"I paid the first night for you."

"I changed to a different hotel. One with hot water."

McIntyre sipped his beer. "You'd have done the same," he said.

I watched three dusty Land Rovers approach slowly along the street. "Royal Anthropological Society, Simian Count" was emblazoned on the doors. They pulled up at the café.

"Probably," I said.

"Not 'probably'," Mac said. "For sure." He looked quickly at my eyes. "You just haven't been out here as long."

"I already heard your 'white women have tenderness' theory." Suddenly Mac laughed, loudly. The royal simian counters, seating themselves a few tables away, turned and stared. They were dusty, bearded, obviously just in from the savanna. "Whiskey, waiter," one of them said. "Bring the whole bottle."

"We sure are getting a good drinking day all tangled up," McIntyre said, finishing his laugh. He took another long drink from his beer, and he signaled the waiter for two more bottles though I had barely touched mine.

"She sent me a postcard from somewhere up north," Mac said. "It didn't say much, though."

"Where'd she send it from?"

"Egypt, maybe. The stamp was in strange letters, Arabic or something, so I couldn't figure it out."

"Then Khartoum maybe, too."

"Who knows?" Mac said. "The way Africa is, she might walk right in here five minutes from now, sit down, and order one of those gin twists she likes like it was the most natural thing in the world to be sitting in the Thorn Tree drinking away the afternoon." McIntyre began telling me of all the chance meetings in unexpected circumstances he had had in Africa. "My theory is, over here there are certain bottlenecks anybody going anywhere has to pass through," McIntyre expounded. "Like where else does anybody go to drink in Nairobi in the afternoon besides here? And what else is there to do in Nairobi in the afternoon? What it is, is it's another bottleneck."

So McIntyre painted a patina of hope on my desire to see Carol again, a gloss that dimmed but was not diminished in the ensuing years. Closing the door on some other companion, some other country, some other interlude coming unmoored, there would come with the hefting of my pack a rising anticipation, a yearning towards the next of McIntyre's "bottlenecks". Other women from the west came and went through those regions, some attached, some not, on their way to here, to there. But with Carol I had felt love stir, or at least a vision of love. Certainly those of us who turned our backs on the draft possessed strong visions, a visionary landscape of yogurt and whole wheat, of music and marijuana, of brothers and sisters all, where peace reigned and violence was abhorred. But our visions, like our bodies, require sustenance. Without it, they wither, turn brown and cast barren shadows, and in the deepening drought of my own vision, I was eventually to capitulate to authorities.

That afternoon in the Thorn Tree however, McIntyre was intent on watering his liquid pursuits. "Beer," he said - he made changes in conversation by simply stating the new topic and pausing briefly -, "is okay here in the afternoon, but see that red line there in the sky? That means the start of sunset."

"What? We can't drink beer after sunset?"

"Not that. It means it's time for sundowners."

"I didn't know they really existed."

"Sure, order a couple." McIntyre grabbed a passing waiter by the sleeve.

"Two sundowners," I said.

"One thing the British did. They kept the price of liquor cheap where they got in control." McIntyre had begun the tortured thread of small talk that was to involve me in his particular corruption of the African landscape. "Up in Ethiopia, liquor costs three times what it does here."

"That must be expensive for an appetite like yours."

"Thirty bucks a bottle for the imported brands. I get so sick of the local imitations, sometimes I almost stay sober. Some nights, at least." The waiter brought drinks in tall glasses, slices of lemon high on the rims.

"The British used to measure a man by how many sundowners he could drink between the time the sky got that red in it, like it has now, and when the last sliver of the top of the sun dropped behind the horizon," McIntyre said as I took my first, tentative sip. "Here's to good liquor." McIntyre gulped his drink, pulled the lemon slice off the rim and chewed it.

"You make it sound like the colonies were full of alcoholics."

"That's what Africa's all about. Sing, dance, get drunk, find a woman. Nobody out here makes a religion out of working."

"People still have to make a living."

"But not fortunes. A little bit goes a long way."

The royal simian counters were drinking shots of scotch, neat, and laughing in long bursts. The red streak in the sky was toning down, and long fingers of lacy golds and ambers were trailing through the high, wispy cirrus. The sun itself was hidden from sight by a line of blunted baobab trees.

"Tell me about the postcard, Mac. What'd she say?"

"Postcard?"

"Carol."

"Oh. I have to think a minute."

"Start with where she mailed it from."

"There was picture of a big hotel on the front of it. One of those old British places with white columns and a big veranda."

"Right on the Nile? A grillwork and then a big garden in front?"

"I think so. It was like there was a lot of vine-type of flowers and then this big porch up above the garden and wicker chairs sitting out all along it. She might've said something about it being expensive to stay there and she only stayed one night. That and some other stuff. Questions, mostly." His eyes caught mine. "I remember being pretty hung over when I picked it up at the office."

"That's Khartoum," I said, and let the subject drop. It made a difference, a very important difference; somehow, I felt the only small measure of real triumph I ever had in my dealings with McIntyre. I finished my first sundowner relieved that McIntyre's card had not been written from Egypt, not after Carol and I had made love. I toasted a bond, not of fidelity nor permanence nor love, but of place. In the ordering of Carol's past, in the temporal ranking of her lovers, I moved myself to the head of the table. In exile, such tiny matters become so personally significant. We pick from the dust trails of our lives specks that glimmer and polish them in our thoughts, making in our minds mental jewelry from the trinkets of our wanderings. But exile has many forms, and it is not always a matter of countries. One needs only to have been a lover left behind at any of life's isolated waysides to know the sweetness of the inconsequential victory that I was feeling as we ordered a second round of sundowners.

Lights came on here and there as our conversation lurched boozily to an acquaintance with the royal simian counters and the business deal that was to keep me in East Africa most of the ensuing year. The simian census was finished in Kenya. The raw data was to be forwarded to London, and the band of simian counters was to move to the western regions of Ethiopia, near an outland town named Gambela, part of McIntyre's vast water wizard territory.

"You'd better drink now," McIntyre said to the simian counters, never long kept from his favorite subject. As afternoon drinkers had left the Thorn Tree, we had begun talking across tables. Now we were all drinking together, finishing the shots left in the simian counters' bottle. "It's hell getting a good drink up in Ethi-land," McIntyre said. I let my mind drift, not really interested in McIntyre's ranting. Only vaguely did I realize that McIntyre was lurching towards recruiting me.

McIntyre's supervision of village wells under UN auspices brought with it a privilege to ship parts and equipment through Ethiopia's customs authority without inspection. Large crates came regularly by sea to the busy Kenyan port at Mombasa, and were trucked to Nairobi for air shipment to Addis Ababa. McIntyre intercepted the crates at Mombasa, inserted cases of whiskey, and retrieved the contraband when the shipments arrived at the UN warehouse in Ethiopia. As he drove through the Ethiopian villages, he took orders and made deliveries to groups of foreigners working in the outlands, such as the simian counters were soon to be. His liquor route, he called it.

"It'd go a lot smoother if I didn't have to keep coming down here to spike the crates," McIntyre said as he recruited me. The simian counters had already signed on as future

customers and left for dinner elsewhere. "There's plenty in this for both of us if I can just concentrate on the delivery end of the business. I need somebody here I can trust to do the crates right."

He had his hand on my shoulder. "All you've got to do is ship three cases more a month than I'm doing now and we can unload them up there for enough to pay you a salary you can live on. Four extra cases and you'll have money to bank."

"Okay," I said. I had no other prospects, and I left the next morning with McIntyre for Mombasa to learn the mechanics of the scheme. McIntyre introduced me to a whiskey importer on the Mombasa docks, only doors away from where his UN crates were waiting. We hired a truck and driver, cleared and loaded McIntyre's shipment and drove to the whiskey warehouse. Inside, we pried boards off the sides of the crates, carefully avoiding the customs seals. Then we pulled out packing material, and inserted whiskey cases. The large, irregular shapes of the pumps and well equipment McIntyre dealt in left plenty of empty space in the huge rectangular crates to stuff in our contraband. We pushed packing material back in, nailed the crates back up, made the long drive inland to Nairobi's airport, and delivered the equipment for onward transport.

That afternoon, we visited a printer, who produced official-looking documents with stamps and seals that appointed me McIntyre's agent in Kenya to clear his shipments. "You've made your first bundle," McIntyre said the next day as we parted at the Nairobi airport and he flew back to his water wizardry.

So I became the single foot soldier in McIntyre's whiskey empire. He bounced around the Ethiopian countryside delivering whiskey and disabling well equipment to ship to Europe for repairs, insuring a steady flow of crates. I moved to Mombasa and waited for incoming shipments. But McIntyre's promised "bundles of money" were random transfers reduced always for the breakage that occurred on the rutted back roads of his liquor routes, reduced also by transfer fees he never explained, and subject to the whims of foreign exchange rates. I survived, but did not prosper.

It was a rogue elephant nicknamed in the local newspapers "Mad Henry" that broke me from the torpor of that existence, a story that played larger in the *Times of Mombasa* than did the murder of Dr. King in Memphis. I had taken to complaining to McIntyre about the size of his recent payment transfers to me, increasingly certain that I was being short-changed. Each time McIntyre did not respond to one of my letters, I recalculated the number of cases I had sent in previous shipments, the expected profits, and the actual results. I was on the short end of a widening gap, and suspected that a lot of the breakage for which I was getting debits was more likely going to McIntyre's personal consumption. And each day, another story about Mad Henry's marauding in surrounding villages and plantations took front page space in the newspaper.

Local editorials appeared recommending solutions, and public opinion turned to recalling from retirement Commissioner Anthony Williams, a colonial administrator who had stayed on in post-independence Kenya to operate a safari business. I intersected with the Commissioner in a dusty drainage ditch beside the Nairobi road, where McIntyre's latest shipment of well equipment, spiked with contraband, was pitched on its side in the dirt, the crates busted open, and the customs seals broken. Liquor was leaking from the Johnny Walker cases I had salvaged from the broken crates.

Chapter Thirteen

The truck driver I had hired for the now-busted shipment was a trusted favorite, a thin Kenyan with deep black skin and a penchant for checkered shirts. Though I had quit smoking, for our journeys up to the Nairobi airport together, I always carried cigarettes so that I could offer them to him along the way. He would take each proffered cigarette, put it behind his ear on the far side of where I rode beside him, and then smoke one of his own, a cheaper brand. After a polite interval elapsed, my more expensive cigarette would be stashed away. Perhaps he considered the cigarettes his tip. He never asked for more than our agreed price after the crates were unloaded and I was paying him for his services.

On the previous afternoon, we had delayed the trip west to Nairobi in favor of a pre-dawn start, intending to drive most of the distance while the air was still cool. Nearing Voi, a dusty market town at the gateway to the sprawling Tsavo game preserve, Venus was low and luminescent on the western horizon, and dawn was faintly streaking the sky behind us. We were speeding, as much as the rattling truck would allow, through a long stretch of dried-out savanna when our headlights picked out a woman standing in the shallow roadside ditch. She was wearing a long, bright dress with yellow bullseye patterns on a field of brown and stood motionless with a long stave half-raised, pointing out to the road in front of her.

As we neared, she lunged in front of us, pushing hard against the macadam with the stave to propel herself across our lane. She lifted and launched into the oncomer's lane, the stave arcing backward on its pivot point and clattering down on the pavement ahead of us as the woman thrust it behind her. The driver swerved away from the woman, corrected, and the back wheel slid on the gravel shoulder into the ditch. Ropes snapped, the heavy crates came loose, and the truck tilted to the passenger side. We were saved from a rollover by the loosed boxes lurching suddenly off the side of the truck bed. The careening vehicle thudded back down onto all four wheels and the axle cracked.

Sunrise had broadened across the eastern sky when the Commissioner appeared. I saw him first as a distant, squat figure standing up in the passenger side of his open jeep, like General Montgomery pursuing Field Marshall Rommel across the African desert. He wore brown khakis and a full-brimmed sun helmet to match, and as he neared, neatly clipped mustaches made a thin white line across his deeply tanned face. He was gesturing with a riding crop to a trailing entourage of vehicles.

Following the motions of the Commissioner's riding crop, one trailing jeep drove down into the ditch and circled behind my burst crates, another circled similarly off to the opposite side of the road. Commissioner Williams' jeep pulled into the oncoming lane, blocking the road as he stopped just short of the cab of our broken truck, which had thudded down angled towards the westbound lane. A Land Rover slowed to a stop several yards behind the Commissioner, who was busy making more signals in the directions of the two jeeps that had pulled off the road. Four Kenyans leaped from each jeep and stood at attention, dressed identically in khaki shorts, bush shirts with large, flapped pockets buttoned down, and brown army boots. "Mad Henry…search!" the Commissioner barked, but it was more like a yip. He had a high pitch in his voice that struggled to break through his command demeanor. The eight Kenyans fanned out and, walking in a part crouch, began to examine the ground.

Doors opened on the Land Rover. Two Kenyans and two Indians got out. The Kenyans wore identical white shirts and blue ties. One had a camera, the other a stenographer's pad, and they walked immediately forward to stand beside the Commissioner's jeep. The two Indians waited in the road beside the Land Rover. The Commissioner pointed towards my crates with his riding crop and addressed the Kenyan who was holding the stenographer's pad. "This morning, Mad Henry attacked commerce on the Nairobi Highway. East of Voi. Pre-dawn raid. Attacks grow bolder. All that. You fill it in, Mboye." Mboye scribbled on his stenographer's pad. His partner began to take photos of the Commissioner, who was striking poses in the jeep as the camera snapped. The photographer climbed up onto the roof of the Land Rover to get a shot angling down at the Commissioner, then began calling instructions to one of the standing Indians to get behind the wheel and maneuver the Land Rover forward and back. He snapped a series of shots of Commissioner Williams pointing down into the ditch towards a busted crate, then out to horizon, and with the riding crop at various points in a grand sweeping gesture.

"Halt!" The Commissioner stopped the photos. "Scatter those Johnny Walker cases." He pointed to the boxes of liquor my driver and I had pulled from the shipment and stacked next to the road. The Indian not maneuvering the Land Rover stepped down into the ditch and approached me. "Give me a hand, please, sahib. We're from the *Times of Mombasa*. I am Editor Kumar." He offered his hand. We shook.

"There, there, there, and there." The Commissioner was pointing with his riding crop, his directions for placing the liquor cases interspersed with glances at the photographer standing on the Land Rover's roof. "Lean that last one up on the one next to it, like it bounced there. Give it a crazy angle."

"What time did Mad Henry attack you?" Editor Kumar asked. He was short, his black hair parted in the middle, but so thin and fine it refused to stay combed.

"Mad Henry? Haven't seen him," I said. "We swerved to miss a native woman in the road. She jumped out right in front of us."

"Please, you must say Mad Henry attacked you," Editor Kumar advised. "Mad Henry is a very big story. We will all profit if you say Mad Henry attacked you.." Editor Kumar glanced quickly up and down the road. A warm breeze shifted his hair to a new arrangement. "And anyway, there's no woman around to prove your story."

"There's no elephant either." The editor and I finished placing the liquor cases, four in all, at random angles to a busted crate. The photographer snapped more photos. Commissioner Williams jumped down from the jeep. His driver, a third Indian in our roadside tableau of Mad Henry's wrath, reached into the rear of the jeep, picked up a huge rifle, and followed Commissioner Williams into the ditch. The Commissioner motioned me away from the crate, then stood next to it. He took the rifle from his driver and pointed it out across the scrub savanna. Here and there an acacia tree dotted the landscape, but mostly the Commissioner was aiming at dry, knee-high grass, sparse and dust-coated. The photographer was down in the ditch now, crouching to shoot photos upward and out across the flat plain, making the Commissioner appear larger than life with his camera angles.

"Write that the Commissioner vowed on this spot to protect all Kenyans from further attacks by Mad Henry," Editor Kumar called to Mboye. "Say it is an oath of blood. Get

a shot of the lorry driver. Our readers haven't seen him before. I want a headline photo-Raging Elephant Bankrupts Struggling Lorry Driver. You know what I mean?" The photographer and Mboye shifted their attention to the driver.

I watched the Commissioner examine the UN customs seals on the crate, then check the exteriors of the scattered whiskey cases, which had no corroborating seals. In pre-independent Kenya, his jurisdiction had included the port at Mombasa and the customs house. McIntyre's scheme was far from sophisticated and quickly obvious to the Commissioner. His gaze took my measure and he made a determination. "Supplies," he called out, looking straight at me. "Put these Johnny Walkers in my jeep, Quartermaster." The tip of the huge rifle cradled in his arms moved down to point at the whiskey cases, but his eyes stayed squarely on me. "Any problems with that, Quartermaster?"

And so I was inducted into his little army, promoted from McIntyre's foot soldier to Quartermaster Paul. We loaded the liquor into the back seat of the Commissioner's jeep, securing the cases on with rope salvaged from the truck bed. While we loaded the whiskey, Commissioner Williams was photographed crouching by elephant footprints that the Kenyan scouts had drawn in the dust beyond the broken crates.

"Bully for you, sahib. This is your good day," Editor Kumar told me. "As quartermaster, you are second in command. Only the Commissioner outranks you." It was post-independence Kenya, but my white skin had immediately vaulted me over the rest of the Commissioner's hunting party. We drove away, leaving the truck driver to watch over McIntyre's well equipment and to arrange repair of his cracked axle. I was riding in the Land Rover, the last vehicle in our little convoy. Mboye, the reporter, and the photographer were brothers, educated from childhood in a missionary school. They were rising intelligentsia in the fragile Kenya that was then emerging from colonialism under the strict guidance of Jomo Kenyatta, the Mau-Mau leader whose bold disobedience had galvanized the conscience of colonial Africa. "My family has been here four generations," Kumar informed me, unasked. "My father has a license to import textiles, signed by President Jomo Kenyatta himself. We are staying to prosper with the new Kenya." He wore a shirt with pockets placed low down on the front, and he kept his hands stuffed in his shirt pockets.

"So there is opportunity for you here?"

"Oh, very much opportunity, Quartermaster."

"I've been reading the stories about Mad Henry in your paper. Are they all as off the mark as this is?" Editor Kumar shrugged and did not answer my question.

Mboye spoke instead. "We are really writing about the blending of all races in the new Kenya. It is President Jomo's wish that we all cooperate to solve our problems. Mad Henry is the way we can show the races working together to make a better Kenya."

"You mean you've made up all those stories in *The Times* about Mad Henry's marauding?"

"He is a very old elephant. He'll die soon, anyway," Mboye said and half shrugged..

"And why have there been all those editorials calling for the return of the Commissioner?" I asked.

"He was the governor in this province before. Everybody trusts him, so they'll believe Mad Henry is a very dangerous elephant if the Commissioner shoots him."

"But he's got a screw loose," I said.

Mboye did not disagree with my assessment of the Commissioner. "He used to camp on the savanna. It makes white men crazy."

We drove on to the dusty market square at Voi and made bivouac. The square was empty that morning, an off-day for the town's thrice-a-week markets. Merchants of various types of dry goods, with storefronts of sheet tin, fronted the square on three sides. A board walkway linked the shops in a sprawling horseshoe. We stopped in front of the Baobab Café, where the board walkway had been expanded into a covered veranda furnished with crudely-made wooden tables that wobbled and metal folding chairs. The chairs had been salvaged from somewhere; various sized nuts and bolts had replaced the rivets that originally secured the seats to the frames, and the loosened seats pitched their occupants forward at uncomfortable angles. Commissioner Williams commandeered two tables and placed them in an L-shape, seating himself in the interior of the L. He had a chair placed to his left, on the outside of the table. "Quartermaster! Supplies," he ordered.

"Go sit beside him," Editor Kumar told me. "Order the scouts to unload the whiskey. Show your rank." Kumar tore a page out of Mboye's stenographer's pad and handed it to me. "The Commissioner will expect you to keep records. He is a stickler for records."

The scouts piled the whiskey cases beside me. One was lifted up on the table and pried open. Four of its twelve bottles were broken. "Wounded soldiers," the Commissioner said and ordered me to note the breakage. He ordered one bottle issued to each of the scout jeeps, recorded as "First Aid Kits", and placed a bottle on the table in front of himself. His driver leaped from the jeep and brought forward a small wicker basket. It opened to two metal drinking glasses, a shot measure, swizzle sticks, a flask, and a mixing shaker. The inside was covered with green felt, emblazoned with a picture of a bearded Ernest Hemingway and the words, "Papa's Serengeti Safari Supplies, Ltd." He measured shots into the two glasses and handed one to me. We stood. Editor Kumar assembled the newspaper crew for photos. The scouts stood at attention by their jeeps. A few store owners drifted out to watch. We toasted the scouts' mission, photos snapped, Mboye scribbled notes, and Commissioner Williams sent the two jeeps out to locate Mad Henry. We settled into waiting.

And drinking. The newspaper crew and the Commissioner's driver joined us on the veranda. We ordered breakfast and asked for empty glasses, and filled them with whiskey. I marked off the bottles on my note paper as we sipped them away.

Editor Kumar brought out a deck of cards and started a game of three-card gin. Commissioner Williams sat straight up at his command post, staring out over the square and sipping whiskey. I joined the gin game.

"Do I get paid for the whiskey?" I asked.

"Just play along," Editor Kumar advised. "There is a big profit in this."

"But that's a lot of whiskey everybody's drinking."

"Trust me." Editor Kumar was winning hand after hand of the gin game, a stripped down, speeded up version used by gamblers who rely more on the fate of the deal than skill. We were playing for points only, not money, and Kumar was already hundreds of points ahead. Mboye was bored. His brother, the photographer, had quickly dropped out. Kumar's Indian driver was a distant second on the score sheet, but getting too drunk to follow the swift deal and play of the cards.

"Why'd the woman jump in front of my lorry?" I asked Mboye as Kumar shuffled for yet another deal. "She had to have seen us coming."

"Ghosts," Mboye answered. "When a bad spirit attaches to someone, it is strongest in the dark. So afflicted people stand by the road at night and run in front of the cars. The headlights make the ghost hesitate, and the person gets away on the other side of the car. Your lorry hit the ghost. That's why it crashed."

"That's a better story than blaming it on Mad Henry," I said. "Why don't you write about that?"

"It's too common," Mboye said.

"It won't sell papers," Editor Kumar added. "Our circulation has doubled since we started the Mad Henry scare."

"Has he really done so much harm?"

"He raided a few gardens. Some farmer tried to chase him out of a field, but he wouldn't leave."

"That doesn't sound like much."

"It's not. But he's too old to keep up with his herd. He'll just hang around and be a pest until he dies from hunger. This way, his death serves a purpose."

"What purpose?"

"It will be Commissioner Williams' two hundred and fiftieth official elephant kill. It is a milestone. He will get a plaque at the Mombasa Club."

"Do people really care about such things in the new Kenya?"

"I care," Editor Kumar said. "Commissioner Williams has promised to sponsor my father's membership to the Mombasa Club if he gets his plaque. It will be a great honor for my family."

"We are the new Kenya," Mboye said proudly. "Any race can belong to the Mombasa Club now."

"But my father needs a sponsor," Editor Kumar added. "Membership is still exclusive." He paused momentarily in his gin game. "My father will be most happy. He has a dream about sitting in the Mombasa Club and sipping a glass of port with the sahibs. He has dreamed it many times."

And so Editor Kumar had set about making his father's dream come true, enlisting the willing staff of the *Times of Mombasa* in his dedication to honoring his father, and creating an event where Kenyans, British and Indians could cooperate in triumphing over a common danger. The gin game stretched on into the afternoon and Commissioner Williams still sipped and stared into the deserted square. The scouts did not return. Kumar's lead in the gin game widened to a thousand points, but no one cared. In the new Kenya, he was a winner. Gradually the game broke up.

Occasionally small groups of bare-breasted women would appear as if from nowhere, skirting the square in favor of the short shadows thrown by the shops and buying paper packets of Omo detergent and getting little bottles filled with cooking oil. Skinny men would wander into the shops to buy a few cigarettes, then squat by the doors to smoke. Then they would disappear again, shrinking from sight against the long, flat horizon. Once a wheezing old bus pulled into the middle of the square. The driver unloaded some boxes that various storekeepers claimed, but passengers neither left nor entered the bus. I dozed, my feet propped on cases of whiskey.

The scouts came back at dusk. Mad Henry was sighted. While the scouts ate, Commissioner Williams cleaned and oiled his rifle. He mandated several bottles of the whiskey be given to the owner of the Baobab Café, ordering me to enter it as "payment for bivouac". We sorted out the breakage in the remaining cases, and had two full cases to load back up, this time into the Land Rover. Commissioner Williams gave the order to move out. "You'll ride in my jeep," he said as we broke bivouac. I sat in the rear seat, and he handed me his rifle. "Keep both hands on it at all times. Give it to me immediately if I call for it."

The moon was rising on the eastern horizon as we left the square, and twilight had given over to darkness. Half a mile out our convoy turned off the road, following tire tracks across the savanna for a hundred feet or so. We stopped when our headlights picked out a post with a small sign nailed neatly to it. "This is the entry to the Tsavo," the Commissioner said, reading what was on the sign. I looked left and right, but there was nothing else visible in the strengthening moonlight to mark the vast Tsavo Game Preserve, just a post with a sign nailed to it. The Commissioner stared at the sign illuminated in the headlights, and he said nothing for several moments, lost I suspect in boozy colonial memories.

The two scout jeeps were pulled up on our right, the Land Rover on the left. We sat with motors idling and Commissioner Williams ordered the headlights switched off. The moon rose behind us, throwing long, clear shadows out ahead. Someone opened a new bottle of whiskey, shared it around, and then handed it out the window of the Land Rover. It passed from vehicle to vehicle and at the last jeep, I saw the empty bottle flung into the dust. Commissioner Williams ordered the convoy forward, and we drove into the Tsavo, pursuing Mad Henry.

We drove with our headlights out, a scout jeep to the front, making a wide circle until we were driving straight back east towards the now fully risen moon. We found Mad Henry, silhouetted by the moonlight, his head leaned against a scraggly acacia tree. "Rifle," the Commissioner said. I handed it to him. Commissioner Williams checked the breach, and remained seated, sighting out over the hood of the open jeep, leaning forward to brace his elbow on the dashboard. Mboye got out of the Land Rover and stood next to the Commissioner, his back to Mad Henry and the moon so that moonlight lighted his note pad as he scribbled.

"That's the rogue that attacked the Quartermaster's lorry," Commissioner Williams said. He was speaking to Mboye, not me, reciting Mad Henry's death sentence. "Mad Henry destroyed government property and endangered the life of the Quartermaster." Mboye was looking at me. I shook my head "no". Mboye stopped writing, and Commissioner Williams sent four shots screaming across the moonbright plains. Mad Henry dropped, his body pitching forward and crushing the scraggly acacia tree that he leaned against. The Commissioner reloaded the rifle and handed it back to me. "Stay right beside me with the rifle," he said. "I've seen more than one old rogue get back up."

We approached slowly, the big rifle feeling light in my hands. I ran my fingers back and forth over the trigger guard. Mad Henry lay in a lump in the dry grasses of the savanna, the line of his massive body clear against the night sky. Commissioner Williams flicked on a six-volt torch and ran the light over Mad Henry's carcass. "Dead without a fight," he said. Disappointment laced his voice, or perhaps it was disgust. He played the

light on Mad Henry's tusks. There was only a single broken stump protruding from the elephant's mouth. Blood was pooling in the dusty dirt, refusing to soak into the parched soil. He prodded Mad Henry's head with his foot and rested his boot on the broken tusk. "Rifle," the Commissioner said. He stepped back and sent a shot into Mad Henry's brain case, then began a slow circuit of the body. "I remember rogues charging with tusks eight feet long." He leaned his rifle against Mad Henry's buttocks. "Those were the real elephants."

Another bottle of whiskey appeared, brought by Editor Kumar's driver. We stood in a ring around the dead elephant. I turned and slowly surveyed the vast, empty savanna, quiet in the moonlight. "I used to keep a bearer with an extra rifle on each side of me," the Commissioner continued. There was no sign of life on the great plain. Nothing moved, no fire glimmered in the distance, no hut stood distant against the horizon. I wondered which of the stunted thorn trees, which clump of sickly grass had called in the complaints against Mad Henry and his marauding stump of a tusk.

"They'd be dead on their feet, but their weight would keep them coming. That's when they're the most dangerous. When they're dead. Nothing turns a dead elephant. It just keeps on coming." The whiskey bottle had stopped its rounds in the Commissioner's hand. He held the bottle chest high, its neck sticking up towards his chin like a microphone. Mboye scribbled in his notebook in the moonlight, faithfully recording the Commissioner's tales of glories past on the wild Tsavo plains.

Editor Kumar tugged on my sleeve. We walked away from the group ringing Mad Henry. "Ask him for the tusk," Kumar whispered.

"I don't want it," I said.

"Be sensible. It's too short to fall under the ivory ban. This one's legal."

"I don't care," I said.

"He'll give it to you. You're white."

Mboye had joined us. "Tell him you want to inscribe it with his name to commemorate his two-hundred fiftieth kill," he said. "We'll take care of everything."

"You'll get paid for your whiskey, and a lot more," Editor Kumar added. They guided me back to Mad Henry, where the Commissioner was finishing a tale about an elephant hunt near Arusha.

"Sir, would it be all right if I took Mad Henry's stump?" I asked. "I'd like you to sign it for me." But I would need no memento to remember Mad Henry.

"It's the Quartermaster's first shoot," Editor Kumar said.

"It'll take awhile to get it out," the Commissioner answered. He passed the bottle to his scouts, who were standing in rank, at ease. Kumar's driver produced another bottle and handed it to the Commissioner. Mboye and his brother went to the Land Rover and returned with knives and a saw to remove Mad Henry's stump. The Commissioner was telling more tales of hunts past, of slaughter in the times when elephants bellowed and lions roared and rhinos charged and men with big guns feared for their lives. The next day, back in Mombasa, I wired McIntyre. His broken crates had still lain in the ditch when we returned, but the truck was gone. And so was I.

Chapter Fourteen

A year had passed since my flight out of Egypt, a year since I had last seen Carol. I sailed from Mombasa aboard the HMS Rajula, a ship of the Commonwealth that had traversed the South Asian sea lanes since it was first dispatched there to ferry troops about the region in World War I. Mad Henry's stump was wrapped in soft cloth and carried strapped to my pack in a leather quiver, the tusk plucked from a jeweler's shop on the way to the harbor as Editor Kumar escorted me to the Rajula. A few days previous, Commissioner Williams had received his plaque at a dinner at the Mombasa Club, and then kept his word; Kumar's father's dream was realized.

"The tusk is legal in Kenya," Kumar said as we stopped for Mad Henry's stump. "But outside, the laws are different. So if a tusk can be proved legal, it is worth a lot more than the illegal ivory the poachers and smugglers are selling." Even then, the US and major European countries had already placed bans on much of Africa's ivory. Kumar handed me the tusk, now highly polished, plus an ivory certificate issued by the jeweler's shop, written in Hindi, and a business card. "Deliver the tusk to this shop when the boat stops in Aden. My cousin there will pay you."

"Then what?"

"Keep going. Commissioner Williams might sober up some day and think the tusk is as big as the one Mboye described in his story." Mboye's reportage had borrowed liberally from the long monologues Commissioner Williams had delivered that night on the Tsavo plains.

"How much will I get paid?"

"Plenty. Plus your ticket is good to Bombay." I was booked into a second class cabin, which I shared with five Indian merchants embarked on a buying trip back to their homeland. They all professed, after much discussion, to know Editor Kumar, whose father they delighted in informing me, many times over, was the first of their race to gain entry to the Mombasa Club. My association with the Kumars' celebrity seemed to give me status in the cabin. I ascended even higher in their esteem when I unrolled Mad Henry's polished stump from its wrappings and handed it round. My cabin mates eagerly told me the story of Mad Henry's demise, correcting each other with the details of the story as Mboye had reported it, and I did not disabuse them with the facts of that sad event. Dead, Mad Henry had charged, had bellowed, had made men tremble on the thundered plains save for the calm, collected heroism of Commissioner Williams and his mighty rifle. I wished the new Kenya well.

The merchants were divided on how I should dispose of Mad Henry's stump. "You are honor-bound to the Kumars," two of them argued. "You must deliver it in Aden as you promised." Three disagreed. "Your certificate is nothing. It is only a receipt from some insignificant shop saying that you have taken possession of the tusk. We can sell ivory for you in Bombay at a high price, much higher than you will get in Aden." The debate consumed the cabin on the short run to Aden. And arriving there, I felt myself honor bound.

The three dissenting merchants walked me to the gangplank and took photos as I descended, assuring me that I would be forthwith arrested. "You will not be coming back to the Rajula, Quartermaster Paul. We will take our photos to the *Times of Mombasa*.

Editor Kumar will thank us very much." The twists in their logic that led them to expect Kumar's gratitude escaped me, but they were certain of it. Khaireldin was right. I was ignorant of cultures. I floated across borders, learning enough of languages to bargain for my bread and pay for my rent. I floated, too, on the schemes and dreams of the people I met, buoyant and unmoored, flotsam washed about in the sea lanes of the individual compromises others had made with surviving, with making a living, with getting on with the circumstances of their lives. Khaireldin believed deeply and religiously in his military, but even in its swift and stunning defeat, had rescued me from a murderous mob and let only the edges of his bitterness show. McIntyre sloshed his way through his pleasures, and embraced unquestioningly what fell within his grasp. Kumar orchestrated fantasies, driven by filial piety and lifting up the spirits of his readers, raising even the sorrowful death of Mad Henry to a local legend.

For the rest of the journey to Bombay, upon my return from selling the tusk, I escaped from the cabin during the days by going to the Rajula's tiny library. In the cabin, the three merchants who had been so certain of my arrest were roundly castigated by the other two, the champions of honor, for wasting a great amount of film. Those two repeatedly assured the chastened three that their photos of Quartermaster Paul could now bring them no advantage whatsoever with the ascendant Kumar clan.

The two questioned me on minute details of the delivery, and basked in the glory of their commitment to honor. "Without honor, there is no human dignity," one assured me. "Without dignity, there is no civilized behavior," the other said. They produced cameras of their own and took turns photographing each other with me at their side. And in the tiny cabin, their status had clearly risen. When the steward brought our tray of morning tea, the two merchants of honor poured first for me, then waited on their bunks while the other three poured for them.

The library to which I escaped was only a cubicle, well aft on the upper deck. Its short shelves of hard-backed books had not been updated since the Rajula had gone to sea at the turn of the century, and volumes of Victorian essays dominated the selections. I read little, but moved a chair outside the library's door and sat with a book open in my lap. At the sides of the Rajula's trailing wake, schools of flying fishes leaped and sailed, their tiny fins glimmering in the strong sun.

Aden was at that time still a free port. A civil war raged in its northern mountains, and coupled with the continued closure of the Suez Canal in the aftermath of the preceding year's war between Egypt and Israel, commerce there had been reduced to occasional calls by transient steamers like the Rajula. A bored official gave me a day visa and waved me onward, and I took a taxi to the shop of Kumar's cousin, a jeweler amidst a row of jewelers. Inside the shop, the air conditioning turned the temperature so low I shivered.

Kumar's cousin wore a dark brown suit and stepped from a back room through a curtain of long strings of white plastic beads. On each side of the doorway, cased in glass cabinets, gold chains and necklaces and bracelets hung on black velvet backdrops. Glass counter cases enclosed tiers of diamond rings. I presented the business card Kumar had given me, which had a short introduction written on the back.

"Yes, I got a telegram," his cousin said. "You'd be the quartermaster, I assume." We went through the bead curtain into the cousin's office. I unpacked Mad Henry's tusk and

placed it upright on a glass-topped desk. The cousin's wife brought in tea. The cousin ran his hand over the broken end of the tusk. "They're never big anymore," he said.

"That's what the man who shot the elephant said."

"Was it poached?"

"No, it was a rogue. An official kill. It was sad when he went down."

"I've never liked the poaching," the cousin said. "It's always seemed to me it could all be done very nicely with tranquilizer darts. The tusks could be surgically removed and the elephants could go on living. It's only a matter of having the right kind of dentists."

"I suppose it is," I said. We drank the tea and the cousin weighed and measured the tusk. He paid me with American dollars. I did not haggle, and the cousin did not offer to negotiate, but he drove me back to the Rajula. "He respected you as a gentleman, a man of honor," my cabin mates explained. "Otherwise, he would have returned you to the harbor in a taxi." Even the three who had urged me to take the tusk to Bombay agreed on that point.

Mad Henry's tusk was on its separate journey now, if bound for America, then at the gateway to the smuggling routes that would carry it onward to Alaska, where it would be mixed into legal shipments of mastodon ivory and sent to the American mainland. And if Mad Henry could make such a journey, I mused in my chair at the rear of the Rajula, could not chance once more unite me with Carol? There were, after all, McIntyre's bottlenecks, and she had had a list. Though I knew not what places remained unchecked on her list.

I was headed into the lands of fables, towards the towering peaks of the Hindu Kush, the elaborate caves of Ajanta, the gigantic Buddha at Bamian, the gardens of Shah Jahan, world wonders each, the stuff of lists such as Carol's. I wondered not if we would again meet, but where, but when, trusting to the random fate that had gathered us together that morning on the bus in Addis Ababa, to the pure chance that had settled her beside me in the dining car of the train through Nubia. As simple as that, I could believe that Carol would appear one day in the twisting alleyways of a Benares market, or that at some turning in the great garden at Shalimar, I would see her slowly approaching down the walkways by the long, shallow pools. There I pictured her, there and in a dozen other settings, too, as the Rajula throbbed eastward and the fishes flew.

In musings, impossible odds do not interfere with the orderly flow of improbable events. Musings coalesce in the presumptions of whomsoever we want ourselves to be, in the logic of what we want to happen, and I wanted Carol.

At the docks in Bombay, I was shunted into the tourist line and separated from my cabin mates, who each one implored me to wait for him at the exits. But I never saw any of them again. I took a room at the Red Shield, a foreign traveler's hostel in the midst of Bombay's downtown bustle, and was soon launched upon the career to which I have returned time and again in the years before and since I once more saw Carol. I became a movie actor.

The call for casting came my first day at the Red Shield. I was sitting in its second story café, an outdoor balcony arrangement of round metal tables and sun awnings, and had a map of central Bombay spread out in front of me. The sounds of honking cars and three-wheeled scooter taxis floated up from the narrow street. The drenching heat of India's humid summers was in full force, and I was the only guest stirring. "Hello, hello.

Want a job?" It was as simple as that, as quick as a voice from behind me. I was recruited by Mohan Mohan, then a rising young producer in Bombay's exploding film industry. "We've got a shoot tonight, and I need Europeans for a party scene. Need Europeans."

"I'm American," I said.

"No problem, no problem. You won't speak. Just circulate. But you must wear shoes. Shoes."

I was wearing sandals. "Buy me a pair."

"Sure, sure. No problem. Got any friends? I need more."

"No friends," I said. "I just got here."

"Sure, sure. No problem. Come on." Mohan was thin, wired, and as frenetic as the Indian film industry. "Every week, one film, one film, one film. Every week," he said in the car, a tiny Morris Minor. "India is number one. More films than Hollywood. India, number one." He stopped in front of a shoe store and yelled. "One pair. Black. Now, now, one pair." A boy came running from the shop. I opened the car door. "Stay, stay," Mohan said. The boy grabbed one of my sandals, disappeared and came running back with a pair of black shoes. "Don't scuff them," Mohan said. "I just rent the shoes. They go back later. Don't scuff." We drove on, stopping at more hotels, but were unsuccessful in recruiting.

"No problem, no problem," Mohan chattered. "You play three parts. Three shirts." We stopped at a clothing shop, and Mohan rented three shirts for me. "First part, we keep your hair long, blue shirt. Next part, we cut it, yellow shirt. Last part, we shave your hair off, polo shirt. No problem."

"No haircuts," I said.

"Three parts, three paydays," Mohan said. "No charge for haircuts. No charge."

Late that night, I was back at the Red Shield, a hundred rupees in my pocket and my head shaved bald. Mohan kept me working, and when there were no parts for foreign extras in a particular week's film, he employed me with his writing teams, editing scripts that had small scenes requiring English. He did not notice, or perhaps did not care, when I began to alter these bit scenes to fit characters that I could play. Shooting began on Monday mornings, and the new film went to the editors by Saturday afternoon, week after week.

When there were no foreign parts or editing work for me, I traveled, and like Carol, I began to check famous sites off a list, the only adornment I put up on the walls of my bare room at the Red Shield. But though the check marks on my list multiplied, there was no magic meeting with Carol. Reality is not so accommodating as daydreams. Nor is it without mercy. I began to build a life, to construct from circumstance my way in the world. I took control. The moment came, on a short trip north to Afghanistan, as I sat on a burlap bag stuffed with Pakistani rupees in the free-trading money market in Kabul.

"Buy it all, Mister. I give you good rate." The money changer was trying to unload his Pakistani bills. We were in the anteroom of a mud-walled granary. In the huge central courtyard, Afghan traders dealt bags of rice and wheat and flour. In the anteroom, money changers sat on bags bulging with currencies. Most were tall, and all wore guns.

My Indian visa expired every three months, requiring me to physically leave the country, and during a lull in Mohan's need for me, I had flown to Kabul for a visa renewal.

I planned to take a bus back through Central Asia's ancient and most storied bottleneck, the Khyber Pass, then cross the narrow northern panhandle of Pakistan back to India.

I had changed Indian rupees earned from Mohan for Afghan currency in Bombay's ubiquitous black-market, gaining twenty percent over the government rate. Now I was being offered a hundred percent over Pakistan's bank rate to change my remaining Afghan money for the heavily regulated Pakistani notes. I needed only to get the Pakistani rupees, illegal to possess outside the country, back into Pakistan and there changed to hard currency at the government's controlled rate to triple my money. I made the trip down through the Khyber Pass with the bottom of my pack stuffed with Pakistani rupees. The bus passed the old stone fort the British had built at the top of the pass, the point beyond which that empire had never successfully expanded, and twisted down through narrow rock walls to the Pakistani plains below. I wondered if Carol had sometime ridden down that same road, or whether I was a bus too soon, a bus too late, and I checked off another of the world's geologic wonders from the list on my wall.

At Lahore, I used the Pakistani rupees to buy an open ticket on a US airline, and spent the morning in Shah Jahan's ancient gardens at Shalimar. I recall meeting a young traveler there, inviting her to tea after I blurted out a too fast, awkward "hello" from behind her, as if I knew her, but she was from Australia and definitely not Carol. She was headed west on the Quetta Railroad and I, east, taking the overland crossing back into India and then the train south to Bombay. Once there, I showed my tourist visa at the central airline office downtown, cashed in my unused plane ticket and had dollars. My enterprise was limited only by the number of foreign airlines with offices in both Lahore and Bombay.

"Glad you're back," Mohan chirped. "Glad you're back. New work. New work." He was expanding into television soap operas. We were sitting in Moti Mahal's Upstairs, a second story nightclub that was popular with Mohan's actors, and which, with my new currency enterprise, I could now afford. It looked out on the long stretch of curving waterfront known as the Queen's Necklace, a name held over from the time when it had been the only night-lit street in Bombay. "You'll be working with her," Mohan said, pointing across the room.

Mohan called over Winona, a curvy, brown-haired British extra slightly older than I. She had ignored me at the film sets several times previously. "Heliotrope," Winona said immediately as she came to Mohan's table. "I've got to have a heliotrope blouse for the seduction scene."

"No problem. No problem. Heliotrope seduction," Mohan said. "Put that in the script, Mr. Paul."

"Oh, you're the script writer," Winona said, taking an immediate interest in me upon learning my role. "Perfect. Perfect."

The plot revolved around a mother's attempt to clear the good name of her jailed son, a native civil servant from a well-to-do Bombay family during the late days of British rule. "I play the wife of a British officer," Winona explained. "While he's away all the time hatching plots to discredit Gandhi, I seduce the civil servant. Then my husband finds out, and has the son thrown in prison. But it's on a false charge, and everybody knows it's my fault. Heliotrope's the perfect color."

"Yes, yes, heliotrope," Mohan agreed again. "Write the scene in heliotrope." No one seemed to care that we filmed in black and white, and the small part I wrote into the series for myself, an aide in the British officer's headquarters, included a heliotrope ribbon, with a medal dangling from it, that decorated my chest. For television, where much of the audience was urban and educated, more of the filming was done in English. My work for Mohan expanded.

The success of the soap opera made Moti Mahal's Upstairs a hot spot on the club circuit, and there was a never-ending debate along the bar about the injustices of Empire. "Of course, you brought justice to India," Ranjit, a heavy-set pharmacist with pomade in his hair, told me. I was recognized at the bar as the British aide who had proof that the son had been falsely accused, but who refused to speak out. "Without first bringing justice, you could not do injustice."

"But I'm American," I said. "I didn't bring anything."

"It doesn't matter," U Tu, a slender Burmese journalist sitting on my other side, said. He wore glasses with thick black rims and was never without a small zippered case in which he carried a notepad and a phalanx of well-sharpened pencils. "The question your show explores is whether it is better to possess justice and suffer its miscarriages, or to have no justice and suffer slings and arrows."

"Thanks," I said. "I'll work that into the show." I was writing frantically everyday, trying to keep up with Mohan's frenzied film schedules, and to get my work far enough ahead so that I could make another trip to Kabul and the money markets. My visa was running out again.

"You, especially, must speak out," the Burmese said. U Tu had escaped house arrest for political dissidence in Burma with the aid of a large bribe, and was eking out a living writing free lance pieces for the *Voice of India*. "You are the new Britain, the generation that understood that Gandhi was right and colonialism was wrong."

"Colonialism wasn't wrong," the businessman on my other side said. "It just stayed too long." I echoed Ranjit's line a few days later in a scene with Winona's soap opera husband. "We're not wrong in what we've done in India," I said. "But we've stayed too long." At which, the husband pulled a pistol from a desk drawer and shot me through the heart. I clutched my heliotrope medal and sank down, dead. I was free to go to Kabul.

I made my second trip down through the Khyber Pass in November, my pack brimming with Pakistani rupees, and Carol, I noted, again was not on the bus. McIntyre's theory was breaking apart, bottleneck by bottleneck. It was election day in America when I got to Lahore. I bought an open ticket from a German airline to take advantage of the soaring German mark, and went to the American Consulate for the election results. "Nixon wins," a hand-written banner in the Consulate window declared, and Pakistani men danced in the streets outside. They shook my hand, slung their arms over my shoulders, and looked deep into my eyes. "Now our countries can be friends again," they said over and over.

They had never forgiven Lyndon Johnson for his insult to their nation. For reasons never known, on a state visit to Pakistan, President Johnson had stopped his limousine on some airport road and leaped out to shake hands with a camel driver, acting as if he were still a young Congressman working his district for votes in rural Texas. "You all come see me at my ranch in Texas sometime," the President had drawled. The invitation was

widely reported throughout Pakistan, and it became a cultural obligation of honor, set hard as stone, for the impoverished camel driver to make the visit. But when he finally raised the money and arrived in Texas, the President had stayed in Washington.

"Now we can help America in Vietnam," a Pakistani student said to me, pumping my hand. "And America can bomb India for us," his friend added. "Nixon's our friend. You're our friend. Vietnam for America. Kashmir for Pakistan." The chant spread through the crowd and an official came out of the Consulate and waved. The crowd cheered and the chant grew louder. "Vietnam for America. Kashmir for Pakistan."

Back at Moti Mahal's Upstairs, the club was noisy with talk and music. "You died honorably," the Burmese journalist told me, and I bought U Tu another drink. I was flush with profits from my Kabul excursion. "All Bombay cried for you. I saw tears. Real tears."

"You used my line," the pomaded pharmacist said, and I bought Ranjit another drink, too.

"Give me your business card," I said. "I'll work your shop into the script somehow." But the scripts came harder for me now. Images of chanting Pakistanis filled the spaces in my mind when I tried to write. I bought a short-wave radio and listened to the Voice of America broadcast the news, hearing repeatedly of the new president's "secret plan to end the war", but there were no details. Only happy Pakistanis, dancing round and round in my brain, gripping my shoulders and cheering for war.

"Kill me, too," Winona pleaded. We had taken the weekend ferry to Panjim, a port in what had once been Portuguese Goa, south of Bombay. We were sitting in the little rose garden outside a sun-bleached mission church that had at its altar a silver coffin with glass viewing panels. Inside it, a plaque announced, lay the perfectly preserved body of St. Francis Xavier, a missionary who had wandered throughout Asia four hundred years before, bringing hand in hand with European trade the holy icons of Catholicism. He brought the Inquisition, also, for even in our best intentions are the seeds of our mistakes, but he has become a saint for wanderers, remembered as a kind and humble man. Time has washed him clean of the Inquisition's horrors.

Winona and I had spent that morning walking on the beaches, where the white sand sparkled in the strong sun and dolphins jumped in the gentle breakers just offshore, squads of flying fishes exploding out of the water in front of the dolphins' pursuit. Winona had disrobed to a bikini at the beach, and I could not help noting that it was not rusty red.

"But everybody in Bombay hates you. You're such a big star, Winona."

"For all the wrong reasons. People hiss when I walk into Moti's now."

"Maybe I can soften your character a little. Give you a redeeming quality or two."

"Mohan won't like it. You've got to kill me. He'll like killing me. There were all those articles in the *Voice of India* when you died. He loved it."

We bicycled back to the sea and climbed a small hill to a little promontory that jutted out over one end of the beach. Below, dark fishermen were letting out their nets. They stood far apart in two lines on the shore, keeping tension on long ropes that stretched out to a prahu laden with netting. In the prahu, one man paddled, another man measured netting over the rear. When the net was dispensed, the men on shore began to walk slowly backwards, heaving the net shoreward, the two lines closing towards each other on

the beach, pulling closed the jaws of the seine. Far out, dolphins leaped over the net, splashing around the tending prahu. On the promontory, we plotted Winona's death.

"What'll you do when you're dead?" I asked. "You're such a villain, you can't go back to making films again. People will recognize you from the soaps."

"I guess I'll go home," Winona said.

"Just like that. Go home and do something else?"

"Sure. How long can people like us go on being actors in Bombay, anyway?"

And so I killed Winona. But not before much debating at the bar in Moti Mahal's Upstairs. "Winona Must Die!" ran a headline in the *Voice of India*, giving my Burmese journalist friend a scoop. Mohan had me write a dozen scripts, a dozen deaths for Winona to die. "That way, no one will know the real way Winona dies until I show it on the air," he reasoned. He filmed all twelve of Winona's deaths, and we fed the clamor for her demise in the press.

She died, finally, of a potion purchased in a shop to which I gave the same name as Ranjit's pharmacy. In the script, the pharmacist was a newly-introduced uncle of the wrongly jailed son, and seizing an opportunity, he replaced Winona's sleeping medicine with a particularly vile poison. Winona screamed, contorting in fatal agony while the wronged mother stood over her deathbed and told of a parent's pain, of the pain of Mother India, of the anguish in her soul and of the hurt in her heart, and Bombay's millions cheered as Winona writhed on the satin sheets of her canopied bed, in a heliotrope nightgown, filmed in black and white.

Celebrating in a packed Moti Mahal's Upstairs that night, my pharmacist friend was jubilant. "I'm a hero," Ranjit said, toasting me with a bottle of champagne. "Customers lined up around the block all evening. From all of Bombay they are coming. They want their medicine from the man who avenged Mother India." I noticed that he had washed the pomade from his hair and combed it out in the style of our television pharmacist. I took the bottle of champagne from Ranjit's hand and walked across the room to Winona, and we toasted.

"To going back," I said.

Chapter Fifteen

Winona did go back. She wrote to us, short cheery notes in feminine shades of ink on psychedelic stationary, and we passed these around at Moti Mahal's Upstairs. She was soon working as a go-go dancer in a London nightclub. We received a large, glossy photo of her, mostly naked, caught spot-lit and gyrating in an iron-barred cage suspended over a shadowy band, and we taped her up behind the bar at Moti's.

The photo inspired Mohan Mohan to create a new soap opera, this one set in contemporary times, and he put me to work drafting a pilot script. The new show featured two families, one Indian, one British, whose teenage daughters had been schoolmates in late colonial times. The story opened with the Indian friend, now grown and long married, sending her teenage daughter off to London to stay for a year with the British family, which had left India after independence. The British family, no longer prosperous and still harboring resentment at being forced to leave India, was to slyly induce the Indian daughter to share a go-go cage with the British family's daughter in a London nightclub, to the horrific shame of the Indian mother. Winona would be hated all over again, this time as a symbol for India's vestigial British values, which our characters would decry as the roots of the moral decay corrupting Asia's innocent youth.

"Mohan wants to visit Winona in London," U Tu advised. "The script's just an excuse." U Tu was a close observer of all that went on around him.

"There was something between those two," Ranjit confided. "I sold her the medicine, you know."

"What medicine?"

"Birth control pills." I did not mention the several weekends Winona and I had spent in Goa. Ranjit was busy expanding his pharmacy business, and in gratitude for the boost I had given his fortunes by writing his shop into the script, he had invited me to become an investing partner in a new pharmacy he was opening along the Queen's Necklace. I, in turn, had invited U Tu to split the ten-percent share that Ranjit had offered to me.

"We're both exiles working illegally," I said. "Investing in a Bombay business could get us legal."

"You have to invest dollars to get that type of visa, not rupees," U Tu said, "and I don't have dollars." So I told U Tu about my Kabul enterprise, and the gap in the law for refunding airline tickets. "It only works because you have an American passport and a tourist visa," U Tu said. "Besides, I'm going back to Burma."

"When?"

"Soon."

"Why?"

"To save my country," U Tu said, and I felt my conscience stir at the comment, like the flutter through the treetops when the first faint breeze of a still morning disturbs the quietude. U Tu faced certain arrest by the military regime in his country, if discovered. As would I in mine.

He opened for us, when Ranjit remarked on his fortitude, the interior resolve with which he made a private creed of democracy, a resolve that spurred him to action whatever faults of logic issued from his ideology. "Arrest is the denial of freedom," U Tu said. "When I am denied my country, I am denied my freedom." Khaireldin had held

fervidly to a belief also; in the certitude of his religious faith he had been as confident of victory as U Tu was certain now in his devotion to the inevitable triumph of democratic freedoms.

After Khaireldin's interview as I lay hurting in the Luxor jail, the old warder had withheld my supper to register his moral disgust at the admission of lovemaking in the ancient tombs. The warder had, in the small way available to him, delivered summary judgement, tipping open, ever so slightly, a window through which seeped a gloom more complete, a storm and bleakness more chilling, than the huddled night Carol and I had spent in the Blue Nile Gorge. Caged by the prison cell's cold stone and hard steel, I had been, like a specimen in a private zoo, captive to the whims of my attendants, and in that jail in Egypt, during the long nights, I had glimpsed the possibility of far more darkness in the human condition than U Tu's sloganeering admitted. Khaireldin had been honorable, the attendant had been kindly, and had they been not, a missed supper would have been the least of consequences. I did not like to remember the experience. My body would shudder involuntarily if that time popped into my mind unexpected.

Ranjit pointed down to the long, sweeping curve of the Queen's Necklace, radiant in the Bombay night, uncomfortable with U Tu's intention to return to Burma. "I can open another pharmacy every ten blocks," he said. "I've got a whole new idea for building a pharmacy business. You could both live nicely off the profits." He leaned in close to us. "I'm going to buy spot ads on Mohan's new show. Write in some big scenes for a pharmacist, Mr. Paul." Ranjit, too, was a man of action, having immediately commissioned advertising posters to exploit the fame garnered from Winona's death. For the posters, he rented display space on city buses that passed his original pharmacy, and at nearby bus stops, he employed children to wave the poster, placard-like, and lead the way to his pharmacy. "The people won't forget that I saved Mother India from the British. Indians are very loyal," Ranjit liked to proclaim.

Much of that loyalty came from articles Ranjit was commissioning U Tu to write for the *Voice of India*, keeping fresh in the public's mind the scene of Winona's death. With prosperity, Ranjit had taken over paying for the drinks at Moti's during our evening meetings, which centered around the three of us inventing ever-new tales about the pharmacist-hero, and into which U Tu inserted his political and philosophical commentaries.

"What hero will step forward like our dear and heroic pharmacist," U Tu wrote, "to oppose the highway the Chinese are even now building from Lhasa to Katmandu, a highway that points the dagger of communism straight at the heart of South Asia?" We had, the evening previous, invented for our hero a radical youth, including a sojourn in Lhasa studying Tibetan herbalism during a period of exile when he fled British persecution, brought on by his organizing pro-Gandhi demonstrations.

I had sat at the Red Shield and listened to a late afternoon news broadcast on the Voice of America before going to Moti's the evening we invented that. The broadcast had included long reports on escalating anti-war demonstrations at universities in the US, and I had simply transposed details from those reports to the pharmacist-hero. "We'll have him lead a group of students into the High Commissioner's office and do a lock-in," I contributed to the story we concocted that night. But my mind was on the demonstrations that I had helped organize years before, when students had been reluctant

to participate, unconcerned about the then simmering war in Vietnam, and the FBI was not interested enough to take notes or get its facts straight. "You can allude to a false report filed by a British agent that vilifies our hero," I told U Tu as he finished taking notes. The place was emptying out by then. Ranjit ordered fresh drinks and we moved away from our perches at the bar.

"I was engaged then, committed to action." I said to Ranjit and U Tu as we wound down our evening sitting at a window table. The Queen's Necklace sparkled below us. "But in Africa, I just drifted. Whatever happened there, I let it carry me along. In Africa, it was like I'd caught the apathy I ran into when I tried to organize demonstrations before I left America."

"And now?" U Tu asked.

"I feel like all that's really happened is that the army just drafted somebody on down the list and sent him to Vietnam instead of me."

"You gave up your country, and your government made your sacrifice a zero," U Tu said. "That's why Gandhi taught that you can't run away. You must stand face to face with an oppressor." U Tu could, if encouraged, relate any situation to something he had read, and I liked him for it.

"And what happens if the oppressor starts pushing?"

"You must know where your line is," U Tu said, "the line across which you will not step."

We watched the Queen's Necklace twinkle below us and sipped our drinks. Reflected in the window, I saw Mohan approaching our table from the bar, a telegram in his hand. "Cancel. Cancel. No new show," he announced. "Winona married. Married" My prospects for steady employment dipped immediately; I was back to polishing up the bit parts for foreigners in Mohan's endless movies. I marshaled most of my cash plus a small stake from U Tu, made another run to Kabul, and we became minority partners in Ranjit's pharmacies.

"We survive here, but it's not a life," U Tu said to me. The two of us were having coffee at the Red Shield. Ranjit was working long hours expanding his business, and with our money tied up while we waited for our investment to grow, U Tu and I could no longer afford idle evenings at Moti Mahal's Upstairs without Ranjit's being there. "I want the same opportunity for capitalism in Burma that Ranjit has in India."

"But we made up all that for Ranjit. His success is just luck, from knowing us," I said.

"Or fate," U Tu said. "What looks like luck to you seems like destiny to us."

"Is that why you're going back to Burma? Because you think it's your destiny?"

"Yes, of course. But also because what's happening there is wrong. We must have democracy." Once, at an international press office in Bangkok, I heard U Tu recite for an editor my country's Bill of Rights, correcting minute details in a US reporter's story about an attempt to impose model governments in the villages of the Mekong Delta. The villagers were rejecting the transplant.

"Democracy's not helping in America," I said.

"Oh, but it is. Democracy is why you hear reports about your demonstrations on Voice of America. It's you that's not helping in America."

"You mean I shouldn't have left?"

"No, leaving was your destiny. So is going back."

"Why?"

"Because times change."

Or because I wanted to go back, I told myself, but I kept my thought unvoiced. Pakistani strangers still shook my hand in their bus stations and on their street corners, waiting for President Nixon to send jets to use for bombing India. "We kick Vietnam for you," they promised. "Just send us jets." Nixon's secret plan to end the war was no mystery to them. They would end it for us. And on the list I kept on my wall in the Red Shield, there was no place left unvisited, none at least where I nursed real hope. The bottlenecks where I had fancied I might rediscover Carol were checked off, one by one.

"I won't go back just to sit in jail," I told U Tu. I did not tell him then about my imprisonment in Egypt, but I suppose he saw me shudder.

"Avoid jail then. Destiny isn't immutable. It comes with choices." U Tu was returning to Burma, but through a back door. He had arranged to join a group of rebels operating in the mountains near his country's border with Thailand. His route led to Bangkok, then northward into the jungles. "I have to make contacts with the foreign press officers in Bangkok first," he said. "Then I can be a voice for my people."

"But if I go back to America, I'll have to start all over. I've been gone so long, I've lost contact."

"There's always a way," U Tu said, "if you look for it." Ranjit was busy looking for a way to get his new pharmacy opened, frustrated by a succession of bureaucrats who were taking their time issuing various permits. The date when Ranjit had promised us the first dividend on our investment came and went, and the new pharmacy was still not open.

"Delays like this didn't happen when the British ran things," he said. "The government worked like it should then. It helped people." We were standing in front of the locked door of his new shop. Ranjit had made large posters from Winona's go-go dancer photo and pasted them up in the windows. He had a street boy standing in the entrance with a box of the posters, selling them for a few rupees each. "Technically, as long as the door's locked, I'm not open," he explained. "If I'm not open, I don't need the permits." A customer buying a poster recognized Ranjit, hailing him in Hindi as the pharmacist who saved India, and Ranjit stepped forward to autograph the poster. A small group gathered around Ranjit. Poster sales picked up and Ranjit smiled and signed, signed and smiled.

"Winona would barely speak to Ranjit when she was here," I said. "Now he's on his way to making a fortune from using her."

"An Indian exploiting a Brit," U Tu said. "I don't think anyone here will be upset by that." We left Ranjit standing amidst a growing crowd. He was relating to them the travails that he endured in the fading years of British rule, adopting for his personal history the events that U Tu and I had made up for the pharmacist-hero in the *Voice of India* articles, and it did not matter to his listeners that Ranjit was in elementary school when the British folded the Union Jack and sailed away.

"In the West, you want truth to fit the facts," U Tu told me as we walked away. "But truth is just as much whatever people believe. And people want to believe Ranjit. They want to know someone who had the courage to stand up to the wrong-doing that they watched from a safe distance."

As I was watching my country, roiled in protest from Boston to Berkeley, a house divided and coming apart at the seams, a spiral of turmoil I watched from the safety of my distance. I tuned from band to band on my short-wave radio, listening nightly to reports of America's tumult come in from around the world. I wanted a pharmacist-hero to believe in, someone to soothe the wounds. I searched on the radio for a healing salve, but I found instead rhetoric that grew ever harsher as war widened and distrust deepened.

"I want to go with you as far as Bangkok," I told U Tu a few weeks later.

"Why?"

"It's what you said about there being a way I could go back, if I'd look for it. I can't sit here any longer being a bit player in Mohan's movies while my country falls apart."

"And you think you'll find your way in Bangkok?"

"I don't know. But I won't find it here."

Ranjit cried real tears after our final evening together in Moti Mohal's Upstairs. The new pharmacy was at last open, and U Tu and I had agreed with Ranjit that profits from our investment would be re-invested in more new pharmacies that he was already planning to open. "Business is booming," Ranjit said. "Times are good. Stay, my friends."

"We'll be back," U Tu promised, but though I was to eventually search for him, he never returned. His dispatches from Burma's jungles stopped one day and did not resume.

"We might be back sooner than you think," I told Ranjit. I had made a final trip to Kabul's money markets, and this time I had kept the open airline ticket I'd purchased with the profits. I handed it to Ranjit. "Keep this safe for me," I said. "I'll telegram where to send it if and when I need it."

We ate and drank and reminisced, the Queen's Necklace sparkled in the night, and at the train station, a teary-eyed Ranjit handed us each first aid kits with the pharmacy's name imprinted on them, and then surprised us with first class tickets for our ride to Calcutta. We were moving on.

Chapter Sixteen

Even then, Bangkok was choked with traffic. Proudly independent, never colonized, Thailand opened its cities to the desperate partying of American troops taking their mid-tour leaves from Vietnam, and so, the city was choked, too, with the traffic of flesh and drugs. In the countryside, mammoth American air bases provided staging points for clandestine raids on insurgencies in Laos and Cambodia, and from these bases air lifts transferred by the ton the weapons, supplies and war machinery pouring into Vietnam. A nation surrounded by war and rebellion, Thailand swarmed with soldiers.

U Tu and I ferried across from Calcutta to Penang, circling south of Burma, and rode a train up the long southern peninsula to Bangkok. From that city, Saigon is only a commuter hop away, and shaken by the bloody street fighting of the massive Tet offensive, the world's major newswires had shifted their regional offices to the safety of Bangkok. Reporters that were sent out by the planeload on early morning flights to Saigon and Da Nang came scurrying back at dinnertime to file their photos and write their daily copy. I made the rounds with U Tu as he went day after day to establish his credentials with the editors at these offices. Few knew much about the struggles in Burma, and most cared less.

"Send me opium stories," one editor said. "Bring me an interview with the drug lords in the Golden Triangle. With photos, lots of photos. Peasants in fields growing poppies, that sort of thing."

"It's not about drugs," U Tu answered. "It's a struggle for democracy."

"I can put an opium story in a dozen magazines," the editor replied. "But democracy in Burma - the world press won't run that even as a filler story."

U Tu and I were sharing a small room in an alleyway hotel tucked into a section of Bangkok that was awash in the partying American troops. Outside the alley, the main street glowed with neon bars and massage parlors bearing straightforward names. Inside the parlors, rows of girls from young to very young sat, barely dressed, behind glass walls, a number pinned to the drapery behind each chair. Men entered, stared, wrote down the number or numbers of any that appealed to them, and were ushered through an adjoining door.

U Tu and I walked at nights along this street, waiting for evening breezes to cool our room. "Maybe I'm making a mistake," U Tu said. "The world's not interested in Burma's struggle." An American GI was weaving towards us along the street, held upright by two bar girls who flanked his sides and who each held one of his arms over her shoulders. The girls were smiling, happy with their catch of the evening; he was staggering.

"Maybe I'm making a mistake, too," I said. Trailing along with U Tu to his daily interviews, I had made no progress in my vaguely formed commitment to re-involve myself in America's struggle. We stood aside for the serviceman, who passed in front of us buoyed by the oblivion of his pleasures. "And maybe that's the guy they drafted in place of me."

"That would make you very lucky if it were," U Tu said.

"Lucky? How?"

"To meet yourself coming the other way down the street. To see where blindly following leads to, where obeying without thinking takes you."

The GI joined the chanting Pakistanis in the cacophony of my mind, where U Tu also had assumed a place. My philosophical friend was versed in the peaceable Gandhi, but he embraced war and was eager for his jungle rendezvous. And Carol, too, mixed in those images. The staggering GI had found in the night streets of Bangkok his oblivion from war, and it evoked in me the memory of my own oblivion to another war deep within the tombs of Egypt. I had as blindly followed my desires as had he his orders. I had, without thinking, dismissed Khaireldin's earnest warning to not step across that invisible line in Nubia's sands into perilous Egypt. I recalled Carol's sensible plea that we retreat back from Khaireldin's line, and travel west through Africa. I had dismissed that, too, and therein lay the truncature of our journey together.

Thus, in Bangkok, I made no new list of wondrous places, nurtured to life no new expectations of finding Carol at some bottleneck on the bypaths of Asia, though still I wanted her. In the passage of time, even our vainest hopes lose their power to deceive us into thinking that around the next corner, unbidden, the cornucopia of chance will open to pour all good into our lives. It had become easier to believe U Tu. Perhaps I really had met myself coming the other way down that Bangkok street. "And if that was the other you," U Tu counseled, "then at the least, you know where not to follow."

U Tu suffered through more ineffectual interviews in foreign press offices, checking each office off a list that he had taped to the mirror in our hotel room. When he finished the list once, he went through it again, revisiting the same offices, striking up conversations with local staff and inviting them to tea in corner cafes. For his listeners, he patiently connected the dots of the maelstrom of independence that Gandhi's decades of resistance to British domination had loosed across Asia. There remained across the southern reaches of that continent no country, no people, no culture that now would endure oppression. In the end, he observed, the British had just walked away, and in the end, he argued over the endless glasses of tea, only democracy would suffice.

"What about us?" I asked him as we sat one afternoon with a photographer for a European newswire. "What about America in Vietnam?" The café had plastic chairs and formica tables, and served a distant imitation of a hamburger, trying unsuccessfully to capture the ambience of American fast food. We had settled there because the noodle shop next door was full.

"Like the British," he answered, "you will walk away. Because democracy understands when it's wrong." He smiled, anticipating my objection. "Sometimes though," he said, "it's a slow process."

As our tea cooled in the empty café, I told U Tu and the photographer of a Russian traveler I had once met, changing money in the old mud-walled granary in Kabul. As we sat on the sacks of currencies and sipped tea with the money changers, the Russian had talked of his escape from the Soviet Union. A sailor on a cargo ship with its home port in the Baltic, he made run after run to the warm waters of the West African coast, his ship and his life a nondescript cog in the vast wheel of communist bureaucracy. At home, he signed up with a local gymnasium and began to practice endurance swimming, lap after lap, year after year. Then one moonless night, between two African ports, he had slipped over the side of his ship and swum two miles to shore. "I chose a place well-known for sharks," he said, "so the captain wouldn't come back and search for me."

"And were there sharks?" I asked.

"Many," he said. "But I swam slowly. The moon came up when I was about halfway to shore. I could see sharks circling around me. If one came close enough, I punched his snout. Then they'd all go away for awhile."

"Why didn't they attack you?" I asked.

"Because I wasn't afraid. All those times I practiced in the gymnasium, every lap for every year, I pictured swimming to my freedom. That night, it was my time, my moment. I got stronger and stronger as I swam. I began to swim towards the sharks when they came back, slow, steady strokes, and then punch, right on the snout." He became lost in thought. "Not even sharks will stop you when it's your time," he said and paused again. "Or maybe I was just lucky."

"Why didn't the sharks attack?" I asked U Tu. "Was the Russian just lucky?"

"He made them think he was the biggest shark," U Tu said. "Everybody respects the biggest shark." And slowly U Tu became the biggest Burmese shark in Bangkok, though that is not a description that fits his small frame and patient resolve. Our photographer friend asked U Tu to go with him when the United Nations announced it would supervise the burning of a large shipment of contraband opium that had been seized near the Burmese border. Together they placed the story with the editor who had asked for Golden Triangle interviews.

U Tu had crossed a threshold. Returning to our hotel at nights, the clerk began to hand over occasional phone messages along with our room key. "I'll be leaving soon," U Tu said as the calls became more frequent. "Editors know who I am now. They'll read my reports when I send them out."

"And I still don't know what I'm going to do."

"You haven't faced your problem," U Tu said.

"Which one? I could name a dozen"

"Face what you fear - getting arrested, going to jail."

"I don't even know where to begin."

"Join your army," he said. "They won't arrest you if you do that."

"And then what? They'll just send me to Vietnam."

"Be the soldier who doesn't follow orders. Don't be like the one they drafted in your place. Then you're not a zero anymore."

U Tu's route to his rebel army lay northwestward, to the Burmese border and to the rugged mountains beyond, the tall, impassable peaks over which the Flying Tigers had once flown the daunting missions of World War II that stopped Imperial Japan's relentless colonization of pre-communist China. I embraced him at the bus station the morning he started his journey, and I never saw him again, though no one has ever confirmed that U Tu is dead. I made one dangerous, fruitless search along those mountain trails, but far too long after his reports stopped coming out, and when I returned from that search, I collected his jungle dispatches, largely unpublished, from the foreign press offices in Bangkok. Ranjit keeps them locked in the safe at his original pharmacy, a point of permanency in our uncertain world that we have established for the day, if, against all odds, our friend should ever reappear. Ranjit is very loyal.

But when U Tu's bus disappeared into the choked Bangkok traffic that morning, I turned in a different direction, towards America. The junior nobody that the US Embassy

assigned to listen to my story, when I finally made it through the borderland of security outside, was disgruntled at having to meet with me.

"Why are you telling me all this?" he asked. He was wearing a lightweight sports coat with a fraternity pin clipped into its lapel. Photos of an Ivy League graduation decorated his desk. He held a pen in one hand and this he tapped impatiently in the palm of his other hand.

"Because I want to get on with my life," I said. I had kept the details I told him simple, revealing little more than that I had received a notice of delinquency and had come to Bangkok to resolve the matter.

"Couldn't you do this somewhere else? I've got over two hundred GIs that have married foreign women and they all want visas for their wives to get into the States. I have to interview every one of them. In person." His voice switched into complaint. "They just marry our guys so they can get their families into America." Of U Tu's Asia, afire with thirsts for freedoms, he was unaware.

"Take your time," I said. I gave him the phone number of the alleyway hotel, and he contacted me a week later. From Bangkok's vast labyrinth of American military offices, he had dug out the name of a recruiting officer who had agreed to induct me. "Just show up there any morning next week," I was instructed. "He'll take care of everything."

I removed U Tu's list of press offices from the hotel room mirror and began to revisit the friends we had made, inquiring if any had yet received any reports from him, not then understanding the long and difficult treks his new terrain required. Nor did I understand the new terrain of my own future. Carol would be there, but in those last days in Bangkok, I was busy dressing myself in the resolve U Tu had taught me. In his persuasion that a voice for democracy that falls willingly silent is no voice at all, I was embracing new compass points, and shedding self-indulgences.

There lay before me a ponderous bureaucracy, a vast territory of deadly intent as willing to swallow my particular smallness as was the mountain wilderness that swallowed U Tu. Sometimes, on those now few occasions when Ranjit has an hour to stop by Moti Mahal's Upstairs after another long day overseeing our ever-expanding chain of pharmacies, he places a third glass between us on the bar and pours it full. And once Mohan Mohan's wife, the quickly-divorced Winona, asked for whom we poured the extra drink. But we did not answer her.

Chapter Seventeen

I returned to America in a mint green jet, my years of exile whisked beneath the carpet of my new status - private last class in the US Army, holder of a window seat aboard a government charter packed with soldiers returning from their tours in Asia. The airline, as if giddy with the steady stream of trans-Pacific flights the military booked to ferry troops to and from the war, painted its planes in the cheery colors of those psychedelic times. That last afternoon in Bangkok, I could as easily have been boarded onto a plane of banana yellow or robin-egg blue. The stewardesses were dressed in thigh-baring skirts, with scarves that matched the plane's exterior, and as they paraded an unceasing supply of sandwiches, sodas and smiles along the aisles, the cabin air filled with the swirl and reek of cigarette smoke and hamburgers.

The officer who inducted me had spent a long time thumbing through my passport. "When did you say you got declared delinquent?" he asked. We were on an upper floor of a tall office building that the army had rented in Bangkok, not far from the street of partying GIs that bounded my alleyway hotel. The office was air-conditioned, the desk stacked with files jacketed in manila envelopes. "I don't want to be responsible for inducting a troublemaker," he said, dubious about an implication I had made that I had come directly to Bangkok to take care of matters.

I looked past him out the window to his back, towards the section of street where U Tu and I had stepped aside for the drunken GI held upright by the two bar girls. "Don't worry about me," I assured him. "I'm here to get on with my life."

"Then you're making the right choice, son." The officer was no older than the junior nobody with whom I had interviewed at the embassy, a freshly turned out lieutenant with fuzzy cheeks, but he called me "son" and it did not register with him that he was the younger of the two of us. "I'll need to get a witness for the swearing in," he said and left the room. I walked to the window and looked out across Bangkok towards Burma. For a moment I wavered. If I was, indeed, making the right choice, I wanted a voice to emerge in my mind to assure me that it was, and when none came, I turned to leave. Confronting my doubts with action had sounded right when U Tu proposed it, but facing the moment, I lost all confidence. I took my passport off the officer's desk and leaned to pick up my pack. The officer returned before I had the pack off the floor, a heavy-set sergeant in tow.

"Raise your right hand and repeat after me," the lieutenant said, and I put my hand up, my pack now dangling from my other hand. "The sergeant will have you sign some papers afterwards." And so I became a US soldier, bound for California and basic training camp on a mint green jet.

The plane was silent. For the men who rode it, tours at the outposts of war in Southeast Asia were over; they were going home and getting out, and few words passed among them. They stared stonily to nowhere, and we jetted over Vietnam with night falling on its deep, green jungles. The pilot announced Saigon to the south, and from my window seat, opposite, I saw a plume of brownish smoke billowing up to the north. I looked down on a valley of rice paddies, caught in a mountain shadow while a brilliant sunset flared across the sky behind the plane. In the paddies, a long straight row of explosions burst orange, beautiful and noiseless, like flowers opening in a time lapsed film,

and at the windows ahead of me, men uttered soft curses with each blossom, though what they cursed, they did not say.

The plane sped east through night and stars, a thin moon faintly reflecting on lost waves miles below, and no one talked, save the chirping stewardesses, who patrolled the night aisles with their trays of sandwiches, alert for someone, anyone with whom they could make eye contact. Occasionally the cabin speakers came on with the inconsequential announcements of flight, of seat belt alerts and patches of turbulence, and heads turned to stare at the speakers as if at intruders, and then we settled back each time into the blanket of the plane's onward drone. I was glad of the silence.

Soft light from concealed bulbs flowed across the ceiling of the plane, but at seat level, a brown darkness hovered, punctuated by occasional reading lights, shafts of waxy yellow through which drifted thin blue lines of cigarette smoke. None seemed to sleep; the stewardesses padding up and down the aisle paused and served, paused and cleaned, but whatever interior dialogues were taking place in that trans-Pacific night, they were left all unvoiced, as muted as the nighttime cabin of our pastel plane. These were luckless warriors, escaping with their lives to an America howling its disgust for war and for those who fought it.

The sergeant to whom I had been turned over at my induction had in turn handed me off to a corporal with long scuff marks on his shoes. He stared at the open-toed sandals on my feet and my canvas backpack, and started feeding blank forms from a thick packet into his typewriter. "Where'd they scare you up from?" he asked. He had been drafted out of college in Iowa, news he shared with me when we came to the form that would inform my draft board that I was no longer fugitive. "I decided to go along with it as long as I don't get orders to Nam," he said. "I'll split if they try that." He had six months left and expected to finish his time typing forms in the backroom office where we sat, the lone occupants amidst five empty desks. "Look out for those bastards in boot camp," he said. "They'll be all over your case if they find out about this." He tapped the notice of recission of delinquency, filled out in triplicate atop the other forms we had worked through, one copy of which was going to my draft board. "Why'd you give up?"

"Nixon," I said. "Dancing Pakistanis. The guy I met that they drafted instead of me." And Carol, I added that night in the plane as I jetted towards the welter of rhetoric and revolution that was already cascading to Nixon's invasion of Cambodia and the horror of students being gunned down on the campus at Kent State. I recalled the night on Nubia's sands, when I ignored Khaireldin's warning, and Carol's decision to accompany me into Egypt had softened the friendless edges of my early exile. "We'll have fun," she had said as we sat among the Arab travelers waiting at the railhead. "Egypt's full of wonderful places."

"How do you know so much about Egypt?" I asked.

"When I was little, a teacher gave me a book to report on that was about all the explorers who went to find the source of the Nile. There was some royal society in London that kept sending out expeditions, and their stories were headline news in all the papers. I've wanted to follow the Nile ever since."

"That's something I've never understood," I said.

"What is?"

"Why people want to find where rivers start." One of the train's passengers had rented a communal hookah from the man selling sodas. A mouthpiece, with its long, velvety hose, had passed round to me. The tobacco mix was flavored with a sweet herb, and the taste lingered after the smoke.

"Maybe it's so you know where you've come from once you get to the end," Carol said. "Rivers get so big, like our lives, I guess. But they start so small."

"And are you flowing into my life, or is it me flowing into yours?" I asked. Jetting eastward in the mint green plane, I knew the answer. She had flowed on to Cairo and Alexandria and the sea. Spartacus, too, had followed the Nile to its end, and then shaken Rome until its columns quavered. But I had turned back, retreating through the swamps and marshes of the White Nile where it trickled out of Africa, a landscape of fevers and mosquitoes and fetid smells. There had been no great river canyon on my backward flight, no place where storms raged and rushing waters swashbuckled into history. But no less than Spartacus, leaving Bangkok, I had set myself against the mightiest army in the world, and I felt small and foolish and imbecilic, a self-appointed gladiator with hopes absurd and expectations moronic.

And so I searched in my mind and my past for Carol as the plane flew onward, into a dawn that slipped so slowly through the window ports that I did not notice. The captain announced breakfast with cheer in his voice, a big American breakfast of sausages and eggs and sweet rolls and coffee, and we were not to be afraid to ask for more. We munched and crunched and the plane swooped into The Philippines to refuel, then hurtled onward into light and sun. Out the windows, water stretched from horizon to horizon, and inside, we waited for America, expecting it, I guess, to lurch up from the endless waters and fill our forward vista with skyscrapers and mountains and long straight ribbons of freeways, and the day stretched forward into lunch. The passengers wore a mix of uniforms - army, navy, marines and airmen, and only I traveled in civilian clothes, but no one asked why - I had no uniform to wear, and was glad enough for it. After induction, I had been handed papers and driven to the Bangkok airport on a military shuttle, with a seat reserved on a transport plane and, for the final leg, a chit good for an onward bus ticket to Ft. Ord, California. Thus I was to get from the plane's landing place at an Oakland air force base to the site where I was to be transmuted into a soldier. "Just act like you don't know anything until you get to Ft. Ord," the draftee clerk from Iowa had advised me. "If anybody rips on you, just say you're on your way to Basic. They've got to back off if you haven't been through training."

The sun was behind us, somewhere over Hawaii perhaps, when the captain announced that the plane had been directed northward, to circle outside of San Francisco, and slip into a landing pattern for Oakland. On the far side of the cabin, heads turned to the portholes, and on my side of the cabin, passengers watched the soldiers staring out the far windows. "There!" someone shouted at the far front of the plane. "There! America!" Voices swept back through the plane as more window passengers confirmed America on our horizon, and then the cabin fell silent again. The plane powered into a turn and banked eastward, sweeping in over the forests of northern California and then turning for Oakland. Seat belt signs lit up, and the plane dropped its wheels, entering its landing descent.

The plane touched down, and inside, at the instant of contact with the runway, the cabin erupted. "I made it. I goddam made it!" the soldier next to me screamed. "I'm out, I'm out," someone yelled behind me. "Two days short," an airman called from the front, and stood up, thrusting two fingers into the air while the plane still taxied. The aisle filled with servicemen, and they yelled their time left in the military and they yelled the time forever that they were going to have, the days, the hours, the minutes, repeating the numbers, some raising their hands and swearing, some clasping their faces and thanking god. They had walked in the valleys and in the shadows of death, and they there and then expelled it with their shouts. The stewardesses retreated from their passengers' communal pandemonium, letting the soldiers shake hands, slap backs, hug and shout and bellow while the stewardesses stationed themselves in front of the exits, guarding the doors from anyone attempting to act too soon on the spreading eagerness to disembark the plane.

We taxied several minutes on a long runway, red glow from a setting sun filling the plane, then came to a stop at a military terminal, and the captain gave the order to open the doors for disembarkation. The celebrating inside the plane stopped, and silence rippled down its long fuselage as the forward hatch opened. The soldiers, silent again, filed quietly out to process through customs and go their separate ways.

The military customs inspector looked at my pack and asked one question. "That's all you've got?"

"Yes," I said. He chalked my pack and waved me on. I was back in America. I returned with a change of clothes, my sleeping bag, a few toiletries and Ranjit's medicine kit, a rain jacket, a short chain and padlock, and, stuffed forgotten in a side pocket of my pack, a Chinese children's booklet that told the tale of a heroic youth who had sacrificed his life to protect his North Korean comrades in a different war. The book had been given to me by a Thai monk who was completing his obligatory year as a religious beggar and who was about to return to his job as a Bangkok banker. His head was shaved and he wore the saffron robe, but when I put a few coins in his bowl, his thoughts were already turning to the career he was about to resume.

"I don't have anyone to keep up my English with at the monastery," he said. "But I've been reading these." He pulled some Chinese propaganda pamphlets out of his robes. "They're the only books I can afford on a beggar's earnings." I had seen the booklets for sale in stalls all over Asia, part of the cold war jockeying for the hearts and minds of the peoples in the countries adjoining the long Chinese border. The various Chinese missions distributed them for pennies. They were written in simple English, aimed at school children, and filled with elaborate, brightly colored drawings. I bought the monk rice and tea at a little food stall and we passed an hour talking. He wrote his name and bank affiliation on one of his pamphlets and gave it to me, telling me to look him up at his bank after he shed his robes the following week. And so I had saved his pamphlet, and forgotten it.

But in those parlous times of deep divisions and instant judgement, of generational distrust and the easy politics of slogans and stances, chance was a fulcrum upon which lives tipped or catapulted, and the brief pages of a picture story about the life of Chu Liau, a boy who had bid goodbye to his mother and marched off through the snow to aid his North Korean comrades in the bitter winter fighting at the Cho-sen Reservoir almost twenty years before, was soon to propel me into the formless landscapes of GI dissidence.

Chu Liau, so the story went, threw himself upon an American hand grenade, a selfless gesture that inspired his comrades to sweep on to victory, that day at least. But the customs inspector did not check my pack, and I passed on with the booklet into the military base.

At the post bus station, I discovered that I would have to take a bus into San Francisco's downtown terminal, and then transfer to a southbound bus for Ft. Ord. With only a little dalliance, I noticed I could easily miss the night's last connection, and so I did. I tore a map of downtown San Francisco from a phone book, rode the evening's last bus across the bay, and emerged into the city in the early night.

I walked the short distance to Union Square and sat on the stone steps; across the street the Saks store was open late, and richly dressed ladies came and went while in the park, hustlers sized up passers-by, dealing their drugs, dealing their bodies. I was back in my country.

After years in tropical climates, San Francisco's foggy night air chilled me. I pulled on an extra shirt and my rain jacket, and decided to walk, checking my map and heading towards North Beach. I gazed at shop windows, aglow with merchandise, at restaurants packed with gossiping diners, at hotels with glowing neon signs with every letter working. I waited at street corners and watched shiny new cars stop and go, saw televisions radiant in the darkened rooms of street level apartments, and listened to the passing chatter of pedestrians. I came across a drug store that provided postal services, bought a heavy manila envelope, and dropped into it my passport and most of my traveler's checks, then mailed the envelope to myself in care of general delivery at San Francisco's main post office.

Fog drifted along the tops of the city's towers and skyscrapers, and by the time I got to North Beach, I was chilled through. Neon lit the short strip of jazz clubs, pool halls and restaurants at its core, bright, dazzling light that cast sharp shadows of the wandering pedestrians out across the lanes of traffic. I rounded a corner and found myself in front of the City Lights bookstore. Over the doorway, on a sign board, someone had written, "I'll never go back to Portland, Oregon." I entered, glad to be out of the chill.

A clerk stood leaning against a wooden counter, reading a magazine and smoking. A hand-written sign beside him advertised ten-cent coffee. It came in a thick white mug, and I wrapped my fingers around the mug to warm them, then walked down a few steps into a basement room where chairs and tables were scattered among aisles of books. I thought at first that the basement was deserted, then saw a middle-aged woman sitting at a far wall, stationed beside a table stacked with pamphlets.

"Pour that coffee out and I'll give you back your ten cents," she called to me.

"Sorry," I said. "I'm too cold to give it up." I walked over to her table.

"You should drink postum instead," she said. Her hand speared a folded brochure in the middle of the table and she held it out to me. "Postum's made of grain and tastes just as good as coffee. No caffeine." The brochure was a tract about liquids that harmed the body, and those that healed, and it promised that complete details would be found in *Heal - The First Word in Health*, a book my hostess had penned. "We poison our bodies with the food we eat and then wonder why we're sick," she said as I scanned the front of the brochure. "I'm the author, Edna Goldman."

Edna was plump, but not fat, her cheeks glowed red, and she smiled easily. "I've got autographed first editions if you want to buy one," she offered.

"I'm between kitchens," I said. "A book on food wouldn't do me much good right now."

"Nonsense. Anybody can eat right any time." Her hand darted back into the piles of brochures, and she thrust "Eating Away From Home" at me, which again promised full details if I bought the book.

"It's just not relevant for me right now," I said.

"You," she said, "are a complete idiot. Sit down." She pointed a finger at a chair on the opposite side of the table from her. "Come on. You wouldn't be prowling around in an empty bookstore if you had anything better to do. Sit."

So I returned to America, not to Carol, but to Edna. Edna and her husband, Ed, lived in a California bungalow at the edge of Ft. Ord. He toiled away as the owner of a small accounting office, and Edna pursued endless California fads. She was a lapsed vegetarian, a former devotee of yoga, a crafts fair artisan who donated the tiny profits from her "Do Not Spray" yard signs to a foundation to save California's falcons, and was coordinator of her temple's Committee for an Honorable Peace. "I'm going to do your chart," she said as I rode south with her later that night after the bookstore closed. "Don't tell me - you're a Gemini." She paused ever so slightly as a road sign announcing Half Moon Bay slipped by in the headlights. I glanced westward over the ocean and did not respond. "I knew it. I could tell," she said, taking my silence for assent, and I decided Gemini would do as well as any other sign.

"I always take the Coast Highway," Edna said. "The freeway is so intimidating." Her station wagon, packed with unsold books, had worn shocks and swayed at each of the coastal curves she insisted on taking ten miles too fast for the old car. "You can't go to the fort tonight, of course. It's way too late."

"I sort of thought it was a twenty-four hour a day operation," I said.

"Ft Ord? Heaven's no. Strictly eight to five. Everybody's off duty the rest of the time. The soldiers all come into town at night. All the shops depend on it."

"You mean people can just come and go?"

"Sure. It's an open fort - anybody in, anybody out. Where Ft. Ord stops, Seaside begins. Then Sand City, Monterey, Pacific Grove and Carmel. A lot of movie actors live in Carmel." Edna whooshed the car around the big curve at Santa Cruz, turning inland towards Capitola, Moss Landing, and Castroville, self-proclaimed artichoke capital of the world. "But in Seaside, we all work for a living."

A stoplight glowed ahead and she announced, "Ft. Ord coming up." The highway split the fort, with the base's acres of buildings on the east side and a long stretch of sand dunes on the west between the highway and the Pacific. Amidst these dunes to the west, with rifles pointed out towards the ocean, trainees using live ammunition banged away daily at targets in the sandscape, learning to shoot straight. Block after block of chain link fence slid by on both sides of the road, separating the fort from the highway flowing through it. "Here's the north gate," Edna said as the traffic light stopped us. "There's another one on the south end." It was a simple left turn into the fort, well lit by bright street lamps. There were no barriers, and a guardhouse at the entrance was dark and unmanned. The light greened and we drove on.

As Edna had promised, the town of Seaside began where Ft. Ord stopped, and the Goldman's bungalow had Ft. Ord's chain link fence as the boundary line of its backyard. "The fort actually goes inland for miles, clear over to Salinas or somewhere," Edna said. "It just grew around where the old settlements were." Centuries before Ft. Ord, Spanish priests had wandered up the Camino de Real and established one of a chain of missions at Monterey, and Spanish noblemen had settled in on enormous haciendas. These, in turn, had been confiscated and diced up when America annexed California, creating a great checkerboard of land ownership through which Ft. Ord zigged and zagged, most of its vast landholding of sandy scrub oaks and pines far inland from the towns that hugged the California coastline.

"The government keeps the fence maintained, at its expense," Ed Goldman told me that night, searching for small talk after Edna woke him from a slumber in his deck chair on their backyard patio. Like Edna, he had given way to plumpness, and a few years older than his wife, gray was appearing in his sandy hair. "Beer?"

"For me, too, if you don't mind," Edna said. "I sold some books today. I think writing's going to work out for me." She kissed Ed on the cheek as he leaned forward to pull bottles from a picnic cooler beside his chair.

"I thought City Lights would be good for you," he said. "I've got some steaks marinating." He stood, handed me a beer and walked over to a brick grill at the far end of the cement patio, near the fence. "Are you hungry, Paul?"

"You bet he is," Edna said. "He's come all the way from Asia today."

"Back from the war?" Ed asked. He struck a match and tossed it onto a pile of self-lighting charcoal in the barbecue.

"No," I said. Flames leaped up as the charcoal caught.

"He's just on his way to it," Edna said. "Just going in. He's a Gemini."

"I was in the Navy," Ed said. "Between w-w-two and Korea. I never shot at anybody." Ed was a peaceful man who accepted what circumstance handed him, and he was grateful for Edna, who pierced the fog of humdrum in which his life would have otherwise been lived. The barbecue grill had brick flanks, on one of which Ed had set a metal baking pan of marinating steaks, and on the other flank, a platter was crisscrossed with a chef's tools for outdoor grilling. From the back of the grill, there rose a little brick chimney, which now was catching the smoke that rose from the gas burning out of the self-lighting charcoal. At the base of the chimney, in the back, was a hand-sized clean-out, closed off by a little metal door.

When I eventually retrieved my passport and traveler's checks from San Francisco, it was in the clean-out that I hid them, sealed in a coffee can that I wedged in the space above the clean-out door. At the corner of Ed's backyard, a drainage ditch passed from the fort under the fence and ran out to the street, dry and sandy except for the few times a year that Monterey was hit with heavy, torrential rain. The ditch was deep enough for a person to slide easily and quietly under the fence. It was the way that I would first enter, and for the last time leave, Ft. Ord. But on that final night, with the escaping Gonzalez in tow, I did not say goodbye to Ed and Edna.

Chapter Eighteen

On long tropical evenings in Kenya, walking on Mombasa's silvery, palm-lined beaches and remembering Carol's sudden departure from the Blue Nile Gorge in McIntyre's Land Rover, our reunion in the Nubian train, and later still, my chancing upon McIntyre in the Thorn Tree Lounge in Nairobi, I had mused on Fate. There are points in our lives to which we seem to have been guided. Event has led to event with such causality that, it seems, to not believe in an overruling hand smacks far too much of spiritual roulette. When we become deeply engaged in our lives, circumstances move with an inexorability that drips with fatedness, and then we can convince ourselves that destiny has taken some special interest in us.

U Tu, if he could, would say that when I slid that first time beneath the Goldman's backyard fence, my tummy full of Ed's steak and beer, I was the chrysalis of the Insurgent General, the GI dissident who was indeed, about to challenge the mightiest army on earth. Unlike Spartacus, however, when my time ran out, I did not stay for crucifixion. But then, I never have quite believed in Fate.

If we each make that person whom we become, then we can also unmake that person, or if not that, we can at least, walk away. This is the conversation I would have with U Tu if I ever found him. It was easier to find Carol. She, too, lay along that path of months and events that seemed to lead me so inevitably to a shadowy interview the television newscasters hawked with the headline, "Insurgent General Declares Fort Will Close."

That first night back in America, I slept on the Goldman's patio, then thanked them over coffee in the morning, and at Ed's suggestion, slipped under the fence and hiked to Ft. Ord's receiving station. "I'd drive you in," Ed said, "but when you're a private, you never want to do anything in five minutes if you can stretch it to an hour. Just keep heading towards that water tower over there." The way Ed pointed me led directly through a section of on-base housing reserved for military families, divided from the training facilities by acres of empty, choppy dunes. The houses were single-story ranch homes with carports, many cluttered with children's toys and the cars parked in the street. Sparse grass struggled to grow in the sandy yards, and white-painted rocks seemed the preferred borders for the flowerbeds hugging the foundations of the houses. I walked slowly, intent on remembering my way back to the Goldmans' bungalow. Occasional cars passed, driven by military wives returning from delivering their lifer husbands to their morning duty posts.

I gave friendly waves to the drivers, conscious that if I was going to be visiting the Goldmans by this back route, I wanted the residents to take me for a familiar figure. Some waved back, others stonily averted their eyes. I passed out of the housing division and cut off the road, into the rolling dunes. At the dunes' bases, in the gullies, I was completely out of sight, even when I was within a few dune-tops of the training facilities, the row after row of green wooden barracks where forty thousand soldiers trained for duty in Vietnam.

"Look at the guy on your left," the lieutenant at orientation intoned later that day. "Look at the guy on your right. Remember their faces because the odds are high, the odds are very high, that all three of you are going to Vietnam."

"Not me," I murmured, barely audible. The recruit on my right looked at me. The left-side recruit stared wide-eyed at the speaker.

"How are you going to get out of it?" the one on my right whispered.

"Don't know. I'm just not going."

"Let me know when you figure something out," he said. "I sure don't want to go, either." It was my first connection to the current of dissent that hummed just below the surface of duty in the draftee army of those fractious years. Months later, when I had deeply snarled my own orders to Vietnam in a long, twisted litany culled from the army's volumes of regulations, I would have counseled him a dozen ways. But I was about to be separated from my first disciple.

I had that initial morning made my way to the post Receiving Station, arriving during a long lull in the processing. A bored sergeant told me to dump the contents of my pack out on a table. "I don't want you going up to Basic with something that might get you in trouble," he said. His attention quickly went to the chain and padlock I carried. "You got a reason for that?"

"I've been traveling," I said. "I use it to secure my pack while I'm sleeping on buses and trains."

"Or crack somebody on the head with it. You won't need it here," he said and separated the chain from the rest of my small pile of belongings. "What else you got?" He gave my pack an upside down shake and the Thai monk's Chinese propaganda booklet fell out. The picture of the heroic charge of the Chinese soldier on the cover was far too curious for the lifer sergeant to pass by. A hard silence descended as he leafed through the pages.

"Pack your stuff back up," he said when he finished reading. He was thin and his face was weathered. His khakis had sharp, starched creases, but his boots were several days from a fresh shine. "I was there," he said. "I was in that retreat from Cho-sen Reservoir." His still eyes stared straight into mine. "Do you have any idea what murdering bastards those commies were? Any at all?"

At the time, I barely remembered the story the pamphlet told. I had saved it for the address of the Thai banker. The sergeant placed the booklet carefully back into my pack. "Stow your stuff in that locker over there," he said. "I'll lock it up for you so you won't need your chain." He took the manila envelope containing my orders and disappeared into a back room office, and it was not until after the orientation lecture that I discovered how deeply his anger simmered.

We were marched back to barracks after the lecture. Most of the day's arrivals were volunteers, teenagers with the ravages of acne still on their faces. I sat on a bunk on the second floor and listened to their chatter.

"What did you sign up for?"

"Infantry. How about you?"

"Airborne. My brother's already a paratrooper."

"You guys go ahead and get shot up. I'm guaranteed clerk training."

"The sarge said I'd get motor pool mechanic if I passed the test."

"Anybody know when we get our uniforms?"

The barracks were old and wooden, the floors brown linoleum polished to a high shine. Two rows of double, metal bunks, with green wool blankets stretched tight across

them, thrust out towards the middle of the room, forming a long center aisle. There were no chairs, just tall metal lockers at the wall end of the bunks. The windows were open and the air chilly, but my pack was still locked up downstairs. I pulled the blanket off the bed I was sitting on and draped it over my shoulders.

"Hey, I don't think we're allowed to do that," the airborne recruit offered.

"I'm cold," I said.

"Maybe we should shut some of these windows," the clerk-to-be said. "That wind's coming in straight off the ocean." He walked over to the west wall, near the head of my bunk. Large sash windows with white wooden mullions that divided the glass into small panes were spaced between the lockers around three sides of the room. The far end of the room was walled off for the latrine; there, also, was a narrow stairway that led down to the entrance. Outside, identical green buildings stretched in all directions, each in its allotted rectangle of grass and walkways. Troops of new recruits marched this way and that, mostly in disarray. The future clerk began pulling down the window sashes. "Leave'em half open," somebody said. I lay back on the bunk, jet-lagged from the previous day's long plane ride, and the late night spent chatting on the Goldman's patio.

I woke abruptly. People were shouting. A sound like trains was coming up the stairwell, and then uniformed men came charging into the room, the sergeant who had locked up my pack in the lead.

"Out, out, out," he screamed as he passed little knots of recruits standing amongst the bunks. He had my pack in his hand, thrust out in front of him. Soldiers with MP patches on their arms were herding the recruits down the stairs as the sergeant passed by and ordered them out. Halfway down the row of bunks he spotted me. "Freeze, you frickin' draft evader," he screamed at me. "Everybody else, out!"

The room cleared, and the sergeant threw the pack down on the bunk next to me, backed by six MPs with various stripes and patches on their arms and collars, insignia I did not yet understand. The MP in charge, an officer, stepped forward.

"Empty your pack, recruit."

I undid the drawstring that cinched it closed and turned the contents out on the bed. The sergeant stabbed a finger towards the booklet. "There it is, Major Miller. It's communist. He's a pinko and a draft evader. I checked his file."

The officer picked up the booklet and opened it. A nightstick dangled by a strap from his wrist. "Printed in Peking," he read. "Do you know where Peking is, recruit?"

"Yes," I said. In Nepal once, I had trekked out along the road U Tu had written about, the rutted Katmandu-Lhasa highway that he considered a communist dagger pointed at the heart of South Asia. Peking was at the far end of that road, a long, long trek to the north, and I doubted that anyone in that barracks room had been closer to Peking than I. At the Nepalese-Tibetan border, a row of Chinese soldiers had stood motionless and impassive across the road. It was during the time that the Cultural Revolution still raged across China, and behind the soldiers, the guardhouse was covered with huge posters of Chairman Mao.

"It's communist propaganda," the sergeant said.

"Calm down, Dave," the major said. "We've got free speech here. An American can read anything he wants." The major looked at me. "That's because men like Sergeant

David here defend those freedoms for us, son." I noticed that David was his family name, printed over the shirt pocket of his fatigue shirt.

"He's a communist," the sergeant insisted. "I got hit by a communist bullet." His hand went to his thigh.

"I know, Dave. My buddy's still in Vietnam, a prisoner in a communist death camp." The major wore dark rimmed glasses and had the beginnings of a double chin. "But it's hard to prove subversion." The major reached down and picked up the first aid kit Ranjit had given me. "Drugs, however, are another matter." The half-circle of MPs behind him stepped up tighter. The major jerked the wrist from which the nightstick dangled, caught the stick by the handle, and jabbed it at me. "Open this kit up and dump it on the bed."

I took the kit from him and unzipped it, then turned it over. Band aids, an ace bandage, a tube of antiseptic ointment, a bottle of malaria pills and some vitamin capsules tumbled out. So, too, did a vial of tablets. The major leaned forward and picked it up. "What would this be?" he said.

"Aspirin," I answered.

"It says aspirin with codeine on the label," the major said. The address of Ranjit's pharmacy caught his attention. "From Bombay."

"Purchased legally in India," I said. "The prescription's signed right on the bottle." I could see Ranjit's signature as the major rotated the vial.

"India's no good here," the sergeant said. "Bust him, major."

"Codeine's hard drugs, the same as heroin to the army, son," the major said. "You could get ten years from a court martial."

"I came by those pills legally," I repeated. "You're looking right at the signature."

"Ten years isn't enough," the sergeant said. "Not for a stinking commie."

"No, Dave, it's not," the major said. "And you know I'd as soon shoot a commie as be in the same room with one. Then again, this signature on here might get him off. I'm no lawyer."

"I thought doctor-prescribed medicine was okay," I said. "Customs let me through with it."

"See, Dave, he's making a legal case already." The major slipped the vial into his shirt pocket. "The commie book is enough for my report," he said. "As for the drugs, they're between you and your recruit," he said to the sergeant. The major reached back to one of the MPs standing behind him and was handed a clipboard. He took the booklet off the bed. "I'll be busy writing up the report, Dave, for about five minutes. With my back to you." He turned away and the row of MPs behind him parted to let the major pass by, then closed ranks again. The MPs at each end of the semicircle stepped crisply around the bunks, blocking the narrow aisle between the beds and the lockers on each side of me. The sergeant stepped forward, and the remaining MPs closed in behind him between the bunks.

I blocked the sergeant's first punch, aimed at my mouth, but his second caught me in the stomach. As I bent forward, another punch smashed into my cheek and turned me, sending me lurching towards the half-open window. As I tried to straighten, the sergeant's fist drove into my kidneys. I bent forward, and I kept going. I dived through the narrow open space between the windowsill and the bottom of the sash, twisted, and just managed to get my feet under me as I hit the ground.

I awoke in the base hospital, strapped to a gurney, a lot of pain shooting up from my ankles. I tried to sit up, but the strap across my chest restrained me. An orderly saw me moving and got up from a desk, clip board in hand. "Some MP said you jumped out a window," he said. "He said you were tripping on acid or something and bummed out."

"I was getting beat up," I said. "Seven of them, one of me. The window seemed like the best odds."

"Seven MPs?"

"Six and a sergeant. Maybe he was an MP, too. They all seemed to know each other."

"You're not the first like this that I've seen. They bring guys over from the stockade for patching up all the time." The orderly's name on his army shirt was partly covered by a white smock and so were his corporal's stripes. He had a closely clipped mustache and wire-rimmed granny glasses, popular with some of the major rock singers of those days.

"What about my ankles?"

"Is that what hurts? I cleaned up some blood where your cheek is cut when they brought you in."

"I took a pretty hard shot in the kidneys, too," I said. The orderly set to taking my information and getting me ready to see a doctor, and in the interview, discovered it was my first day in the army.

"You should go to the Inspector General," he said. "Even the army won't let the lifers get away with jumping a guy before he's been through Basic." And it would be weeks before I got to Basic. A doctor ordered x-rays and assigned me to an open ward. "You can't go to Basic on those ankles," he said. "We'll x-ray again in a week when the swellings go down and make sure there's nothing broken. And let me know if your kidneys start to feel worse."

Once a day, a doctor walked through the ward, which was mostly empty most of the time. I lay on a bed with my feet up on pillows, and when I could hobble with my ankles wrapped, I found a wheel chair in the hall and rolled myself back to the orderly who had admitted me.

"Tell me more about the Inspector General," I said.

"It's who you can go to if somebody's running a number on you and your company captain won't put it right," the orderly said. He was sitting at his desk with his hospital smock off, and I saw his name, Cantell. "He's a recourse for people that don't have any other recourse," the corporal said.

"I'm not sure what he could do for me. I've already been beat up."

The orderly went to a file cabinet and pulled out some records. "This file has the results from the blood test we took when you came in. There's nothing here that shows you were on drugs. So are you going to just let them get away with it?"

"They could say I just jumped. Nobody else saw them beating on me."

Cantell stared at me. "Come on," he said. "I'll wheel you down there." He got behind the wheelchair and pushed me along the halls, then out into the fresh air. A bright morning sun was throwing shadows on the ground from big fluffy clouds that were drifting in from the ocean. I was dressed in a hospital gown and a white bathrobe. "This is a hell of a lot better than sitting around that office," the orderly said. He pushed me slowly along on the sidewalk that paralleled the long main street of Ft. Ord's

administrative heart. Most of the buildings were barracks-sized with signs staked out in front of them identifying their functions. The Inspector General's office was in the Judge Adjutant General's complex, where the army's lawyers spent their days running the military court system.

"Army law's just the opposite of what it is on the outside," Cantell said. "Here, you're assumed guilty and it's up to you to prove you're innocent."

"There was just me there. I can't prove they did anything to me."

"You didn't understand what I just told you," the orderly replied. "Once you accuse them, if the army buys it, the MPs have got to prove they didn't do it. Guilty until proven innocent."

Cantell helped me hobble up the single step that fronted the door of the IG's building, and seeing the wheelchair, the administrative aide who manned the IG's outer office came forward to help. He was in dress uniform, and there were rows of bright yellow lifer's stripes down the lower sleeve of his coat. He took my statement, and I never did meet the Inspector General, whomever or whatever he was. I did mention the aspirin with codeine the major had confiscated.

"What was in the book the sergeant didn't like," the aide asked.

I shrugged. "It's got my banker's address in Bangkok written in it," I said. "I'd like it back."

"That's it? You just want your book back?"

"He got beat up," the orderly said. "His medical tests don't show any sign of drugs in his blood when he was admitted. The MP lied." Cantell laid the medical file on the aide's desk and opened it to the blood test.

"And who are you in all this?" the aide asked him.

"I admitted him. I saw him when he came into the hospital. That cut on his cheek came from a fist." The aide glanced at Cantell's name on his army shirt, made a few notes and closed the medical file, then addressed me.

"The IG can get your book back, and he'll find out what happened to the drugs you brought on base," the aide said. "They'll be returned to you if they're legal. But bringing charges for a court-martial is a different matter entirely. You two'll have to go over to the JAG office and talk to the lawyers if you want to pursue that." He pointed out the window. "That building over there. And I'm sorry your tour in the army's off to such a rough start. We're here to help. Anytime."

Outside, Cantell started to wheel me back to the hospital. "Are you in a hurry?" I asked.

"Hell, no. I've got another eighteen months to kill." I pointed towards the JAG office.

"Then let's go over there," I said.

We had finished the visit to the Inspector General's office at high noon, lunchtime in the army, and we arrived at the JAG office a few minutes later. The door was unlocked, but nobody was in any of the small offices that opened from a large central reception area. One wall was lined with law books, and down the center of the room there was a long metal rack in which were suspended rows of loose leaf binders. In these binders were the ever-updated reams of regulations that govern military life, the red tape that has been the butt of army jokes for generations.

"So this is where it comes from," Cantell said.

"Where what comes from?"

"The lifer mindset. The business of never having to think about anything because there's always a reg that covers the situation." We looked around and left without seeing a lawyer.

The swelling that lingered in my ankles perplexed the doctors, partly because the doctors were indifferent, and partly because of the metal bucket I commandeered each morning from a cleaning closet. Daily, before the doctor's rounds, I would fill the bucket with hot water and soak my feet, drawing the blood into them to puff them up. Then I would sit with my feet dangling down over the side of the bed until I heard the doctor's entourage in the hallway. "We need to get you into a specialist," one of the daily doctors finally said and scribbled a note on my chart. After signing me over to the fort's single podiatrist, the doctors no longer checked my feet on their daily rounds. I was someone else's concern, and my appointment with the specialist was weeks away.

As my ankles improved, I made daily trips to the JAG office, arriving a few minutes after noon, reading through the regs for forty-five minutes and then exiting before the JAG lawyers returned from their officers' mess. Still without a uniform, I found that once outside the hospital, I could wander the base unchallenged as much as my ankles could stand. The Receiving Station existed only to process incoming inductees into units to send on to Basic, a large area to the east of the fort's administrative heart. That heart, I discovered, stretched parallel along the highway fence I had observed that first night riding into Seaside with Edna. The Receiving Station was set up to quickly transit inductees, and the hospital had nowhere to release me to until I could be certified fit for Basic's rigors. I had slipped through a crack in the military's endless routines.

Cantell found it hilarious. "The more you go out on your walks," he said, "the longer your sprains won't heal enough to go to Basic. Just don't get caught leaving the hospital. The army's so screwed up, you might spend your whole two years with never even getting a uniform." It was he who retrieved my pack from the Receiving Station.

"That sergeant wanted to know what happened to you," Cantell told me. "I said you had some kidney damage, and he said he hopes you bleed to death."

"I didn't do anything to him," I said. I remembered Mad Henry. "Once in Africa," I told Cantell, "I saw an elephant killed. He didn't do anything but wander through a few fields and eat some crops. But he was hated and feared and there was a big celebration when he was shot."

"There's lifers and there's us," Cantell replied. "Don't ever think one of them will ever do anything good for one of us. And hey, do me a favor and see if you can uncover a way I can get a discharge while you're down at JAG reading those regs." So I lounged in the base hospital, my forays outside no more noteworthy than Mad Henry's occasional detours into some village garden or across a farmer's field. Mad Henry, who had done no more than follow his instincts, his hunger, had slumbered unaware on his African plain, and I have wondered, sometimes, if just before the lethal bullets flew, he awakened.

One evening, my ankles improved and heavily taped, I walked back to the lifer housing section, found the gully under the fence, and slipped into the Goldman's backyard in the dark. Ed and Edna were on the patio, the barbecue fired up.

"Remember me?" I said. Edna jumped. Ed turned away from the grill and flicked on the patio lights.

"Where'd you come from?" Edna gasped. "You scared me half to death."

"Under the fence," I said.

"You're not AWOL, are you?" Ed asked. "Aren't you supposed to be in Basic?"

"I'm in the hospital," I said. "So I don't think this counts as being AWOL." But I promised myself to look it up in the army regs the next day. Ed popped a beer for me, put another steak on the grill, and I told the Goldmans the story of my reception into the army.

"Just because of a children's story about a Chinese soldier?" Edna said. "It's McCarthyism all over again, Ed. It's just like what happened to my dad." Her father had been both Jewish and a professor in New York City, and for a short time during the Great Depression, had joined the Communist Party. "But he quit, and during the war, he was an intelligence analyst," Edna told me. "Then Joe McCarthy dug up his past somehow, and said he was an example of communists infiltrating the government and having sensitive information. My father lost his teaching job and never got good work again. It killed him. I know that's what killed him." She looked up with tears in her eyes, and Ed wandered over from the grill and put his hand on her shoulder. "Dad was a Gemini, too," she said to me. Such was the genesis of my nomination for adoption by Edna's Committee for an Honorable Peace. Somehow it made her feel that championing me assuaged the wrong done to her father.

"We call the committee 'CHP' for short," Edna said and Ed got in, "Right - California Highway Patrol," as an aside to me before Edna rushed on. "We meet every Thursday night. I'm going to take your case to the board itself!"

She jumped up from her chair. "I'm going to write it on the agenda right now."

"Don't expect much," Ed said as Edna went inside. "It's only a bunch of women that get together and talk about the past. There are lots like Edna - Jews whose parents had leftist leanings during the Depression. It made them easy targets during the McCarthy hearings. They're more interested in rehashing injustices that happened twenty years ago than in doing anything about the problems in Vietnam."

"So you're against the war, too?"

Ed shook his head. "I just consider it a mess," he said. "A terrible mess. It's pulling our country apart, and I don't like that. But with my business, I keep my opinions to myself." Through his clients, Ed had connections throughout the area, and for whichever new enthusiasm caught his wife's attention, Ed was able to make a few phone calls and smooth her way. "I don't mind doing it for her at all," Ed once told me. "I just want her to be happy." It was Ed who had connected Edna to City Lights bookstore, and it was he, too, who arranged for the television news crews that would interview me. But until the telecast of the clandestine interview that tagged me as the Insurgent General, I think he had little idea what a success Edna and the CHP had become.

"Just as day becomes night, and night becomes day," U Tu would have argued, "you were destined to meet Edna. The cycle of her life would have been incomplete without you, so you had to meet. You're a Gemini, her father was a Gemini. That's the clue. You made choices, and those choices could lead you nowhere but to Edna." I had pressed him on a similar issue once, and he had given me the example of big fish eating

little fish, perhaps because we were in a little restaurant beside one of Bangkok's ubiquitous *klongs*, eating shrimp and watching fishermen pole their long canoes past us in the gently flowing currents. "It does not matter which big fish eats which little fish," he said. "Those two fish have had the whole ocean to roam in, but what matters is that from all the choices they have made in that great ocean, those choices bring each to that one moment. And it cannot be otherwise."

"Then there can be no other course for the little fish?" I asked.

"Of course there can," U Tu answered. "It swims right instead of left somewhere. But then it gets eaten by some other big fish. Its destiny is the same."

"The cook could have given me your plate of shrimp, and mine to you, but we still eat the shrimp," I said, and U Tu smiled his agreement. I have wondered if U Tu met his fate, surely a violent one in the lawlessness and anarchy that is the Golden Triangle, with the philosophical assurance we found that pleasant evening in plates of skewered shrimp. When I left the army with Gonzalez in tow, police lights flashing behind us and jeep loads of MPs circling through the fort, I had felt terror, and once we had crawled into the Goldmans' gully and under the fence, we did not stop until we were across the border. Far across it.

Chapter Nineteen

If there is a military archives in which the Insurgent General's by now surely yellowing file survives, I suppose the army officer assigned to ferreting out the identity of that shadowy figure concluded that he was me. There were, after all, no further incidents following my disappearance, adequate proof of my complicity from the army's point of view. Then again, pursuing the Insurgent General would have been a comfortable assignment for that investigator, and he easily might have kept the case alive until his own day of discharge, a lightweight duty even in the eight-to-five culture of Ft. Ord that I so disturbed. Cantell wrote me once that an officer came poking through my file at the hospital well after I left, not long before his own discharge was due.

"I told him you were one gung-ho guy," Cantell wrote, and I could hear his chuckle. "I said you kept pestering the doctors to clear you so you could get up to Basic and that all you talked about was how much you wanted to get issued your uniform."

Cantell was a native Californian, a Los Angeles surfer who had sold his Chevy Nomad when he got his draft notice and then bought a Volkswagen bus upon receiving his assignment to Ft. Ord. "San Francisco is like a different country from LA," he told me. "The girls up here aren't into the tanned beach guy thing." Friday evenings, when he did not have weekend duty, he was quickly off to San Francisco for the night, and he rarely returned until the very early hours of Monday morning. "I crash in the Haight or somewhere," he said. "It's never a problem."

He showed me his van in the parking lot outside the hospital one afternoon. "Check this out," he said. We were kneeling behind the front passenger seat. The rear seats had been removed, there was a thin mattress rolled up in the back, and Cantell was unlocking a trunk that was shoved up close to the van wall behind the driver's seat. Inside the trunk were several wigs, a brightly striped Guatemalan shirt, strings of love beads, and a velvet vest with golden piping. "I get a mile north of the fort, change into this stuff, and nobody can tell I'm in the army," Cantell said. He picked up one of the wigs. "This is my John Lennon look," he said. "I've got this pony tail wig, too. It's the best one for the Grateful Dead concerts. Want to go?"

"Am I allowed off the fort?"

"Besides me, who the hell even knows you're here?" Cantell said.

"What about the doctors coming around?"

"Like they care. We just pull your chart off the end of the bed, stick it in my desk for the weekend, and when we get back, initial it for Saturday and Sunday. The same doctors never have weekend duty twice in a row."

So Cantell, too, was dealt a hand in that strange coalescence of events that are my army career. Or perhaps he just dealt himself in. "The Dead are playing at the Fillmore tonight," Cantell said the first weekend I went north with him. Dusk had fallen, we were cruising up the interstate, and Cantell had lit a joint.

"I think I've heard of that place," I said. "My girl friend in Africa used to go there."

"You've got an African girl friend?" and for the first time, I heard Cantell's stoned chuckle. It was as warm and inviting as loaves of freshly baked bread. "What's her name? Boulli-boulli Wanna or something?"

"Not African African," I said. "Carol's American. She used to go to Berkeley. We were traveling together, but we got split up during the war in Egypt. I haven't seen her since."

"Egypt? What war in Egypt? Hey, maybe she's back around here. Everybody for a hundred miles goes to the Fillmore if they want to hear music."

And it was like that. One night, she was there, though I did not meet her on that first trip to the Fillmore. The music of the time, loud and pulsing, was intent on sensory overload, and the Fillmore amplified that intent with elaborate light shows. Drugs freely circulated, passed about on the huge dance floor from hand to hand as strobes flashed on and off and dancers swirled, oblivious to anything but the long, pounding guitar riffs of acid rock. This was some dimension beyond the world of Winona's trendy London go-go cage, a place that pushed past boundaries, stepped over the lines of safeness and drew forth selves we did not know were in us.

I lost track of Cantell in the swarming dancers that first night, and found him again just before closing when he appeared in a long line that ascended onto the stage to dance amongst the musicians and end the show in a communal celebration of stoned brotherhood.

We partied on after that concert, the van packed with revelers from the dance floor to whom Cantell had offered rides. We cruised through the city streets to this or that apartment known to one or another of the passengers, and when Cantell's energy gave out, we lay down on the floor of wherever we were and slept until early the next afternoon. "That was a lot different than Moti Mahal's Upstairs," I said to him as we sipped coffee and Cantell poked at the macrobiotic lunch special offered by the little restaurant we found near the apartment in which we had crashed.

"Moti what? What's that?"

"An actor's hangout I went to a lot in Bombay," I said.

"Bombay? That's not in Africa, is it? I thought you said you were in Africa."

"I moved around a lot. I had a job in Bombay."

"That's in India, right? How come there were actors in Bombay?"

"They make lots of movies there," I said. "More than in Hollywood, even."

"Oh. I know they've made some movies in France and Italy. Sophia Loren, Brigitte Bardot. You ever meet them at that place?"

"No," I said.

"Jane Fonda married some French director. She's practically naked in the movie they made. But it's in English, so it's not really a foreign film." I began, then, to realize the gulf that had grown between my generation and myself during the years I had spent overseas. As the Sixties touched their various inflection points of war and peace, of civil rights and women's rights, of ecology and rallies and riots, Cantell had partied on. As we sorted through the confusion of those turbulent times, the frenzy of music and dance made a common touchpoint. The wigs and the love beads were where Cantell escaped to each weekend. And I joined him often enough. I would not have found Carol otherwise.

I checked old phone books, and I called the long distance information for Berkeley, Oakland, and San Francisco, but Carol was not listed. Her former university would say only that she was no longer a student there. The dead ends piled up, and I was drawn

deeper and deeper into filling the duties of the Insurgent General, whose look I got from Cantell's trunk of wigs and beads.

"You can have some of this stuff if you want," Cantell told me as we stopped and he changed clothes at a gas station the evening of our first trip to San Francisco. "This Che Guevara look doesn't work for me. Too much like the army." He handed me a bushy, dark haired wig and a beret. Later, I added sunglasses and a red bandana that I pulled up over the lower part of my face when I met with reporters, and Edna sewed shoulder pads into an old army shirt for me to broaden my physique. But disguise was rarely needed. There did come a day, however, six weeks after I entered the hospital, when I had to meet with the army's foot specialist, and my transfer to Basic was summarily ordered. I left the odds and ends of my trips to San Francisco cached in Cantell's van, and had already secreted my passport and money in the Goldman's barbecue grill.

Edna insisted that I phone her weekly during Basic so that she could update my case at her CHP meetings. I had been adopted by the good ladies, and Ed had phoned a chaplain on the base who had come to him for tax advice. We had had a meeting - a delegation of the CHP ladies, the chaplain, and I - over steaks on the Goldman's patio, with Ed grilling and basting and poking the charcoal while the rest of us talked. The chaplain had driven me back to the hospital afterwards.

"That Ed's a nice guy," the chaplain said as he dropped me off. "We're lucky to make friends with fine, upstanding members of the local community like the Goldmans. It's always hard, in the army life, moving around all the time, to meet people from outside the base."

"They've certainly been nice to me," I said.

"Well, let's not let the wrong start you got off to in the army concern them," he said. "We want to keep a good image with the community."

"Hey, I got shoved out a window," I answered.

"And on behalf of the army, I apologize for that. If anything else happens, anything at all, you come straight to me. And I'm going to make sure you get your book back." The chaplain was overweight, but not seriously so. He was slipping pear-shaped into early middle age. Much of my official army career was to be spent as a detail man assigned to cleaning his chapel, and I can remember his face, his gentle demeanor, and his sincere desire for the days to run smoothly from eight to one, but I cannot remember his name. That space in my memory is as blank as was his appointment book in the afternoon.

The chaplain lived on base, tucked into the far end of the housing compound that sat on the other side of the fence from the Goldmans, but I doubt he realized that he was almost their neighbor. I certainly never told him about the gully under the fence, and on a few evenings I volunteered to watch his two young sons while he and his wife attended some community functions. It was from his boys that I learned why the chaplain never scheduled afternoon appointments.

"Mommy works in town all afternoon," one of them informed me. They were hungry and I had asked them what kind of snack their mother fixed for them. "Daddy makes our snacks. We get cheese sandwiches for Sesame Street," the older son answered. They pulled mayo, white bread and cheese singles from the refrigerator and showed me how daddy made their sandwiches, and I learned about the family's daily routine. I learned that

the chances of Daddy coming back to the chapel once Mommy went to work were very, very slim. The chapel became mine each afternoon, and the Insurgent General had a base of operations. My office was in the choir loft. I even had a telephone, after I spliced into the wire that led down to the chaplain's office, and most importantly, the loft had a small window that looked out over the sidewalk that led up to the front entrance. With the window open, I could hear immediately the distinct sound of army boots on the pavement if anyone approached the chapel door.

I was half way through Basic the first time I saw the chapel. The drill sergeant called me into his office at the end of the barracks after a day of marching, drilling, running and exercising. The training was not all wasted on me. My body became toned and muscular and I discovered that I liked physical fitness; during my fruitless trek along the opium routes in the Burmese jungle, searching for U Tu, cowering in swampy muck as I disappeared off-trail to avoid drug caravans, I thanked the drill sergeant for the courage to get face down and dirty. He was straight to the point with me. "I hope you can tell me why, Private Rhodes, I've got a memo from the Inspector General ordering me to fix up an appointment with this chaplain for you." He was holding a piece of letter paper with the thumb and forefinger of each hand, stretching it diagonally taut across upper and lower corners.

"It's a mystery to me, sergeant," I said.

"Recruits don't even know there is an Inspector General. It's not in your training." He stared hard at me, expecting me to melt, I guess. "Have you put in some complaint about me?"

"No, sergeant," I answered. There was not much to complain about. The drill sergeant showed up after breakfast, made sure our bunks were made, and marched us around on our day's training. Mostly, he turned us over to specialists who put us through the various exercises, then he returned from smoking and talking with other drill sergeants when it was time to move us on to the next training station. At five, or as soon thereafter as he could get away, he disappeared from our lives. But he personally taught us how to crawl on our bellies through a pit of mud without getting our rifles dirty. That is, he stood at the end of the pit, personally inspected each rifle, and if there was mud on it, we cleaned it off and the whole squad crawled through the pit again. "In Vietnam," he liked to say, "the paddies got snakes in 'em."

I killed a snake once, in the muck in Burma. I do not know if it was poisonous, or if it meant me harm. But I do not think I would have seen the snake had it not been for the drill sergeant's constant harping about the Vietnamese mud. And so events connect, sometimes simply and starkly, as in the case of the dead snake, and sometimes as complexly as the ramps and overpasses that shunt and shuttle the traffic from freeway to freeway in our teeming cities. We do not always know how we get from one place to another, but get there we do, and afterwards, with some thought, we can trace the way we have come on a map. It all seems so easy, looked at on a map.

"Your platoon's got eye exams tomorrow," the drill sergeant said. He held the memo up, turned toward me, and pointed to the top line. "Can you read that?"

"It says *Inspector General*," I said.

"You don't need glasses then. Go see this chaplain first thing after breakfast tomorrow." He gave me a visitor's map to the fort with a route from the barracks to the chapel marked in red ink.

The chaplain was pushing a vacuum cleaner around the base of the altar when I got to my appointment. He almost apologized for being seen tidying up. "Usually, the holdover barracks sends me a detail guy to do clean up," he told me as we walked up the aisle to his office at the front of the church. "But there's so much pressure to send replacements to Vietnam now that not many soldiers' orders get flagged anymore."

"What's flagged?" I asked.

"It's when there's something that stops your orders from taking effect. You get held over wherever you are until the orders get straightened out. So the army puts holdovers on day-by-day assignments until they get squared away again."

The chaplain had a coffeepot in his office, and he poured cups for each of us. We sat down. "I saw Edna and her committee again," he said. "I'm happy to tell you, and I told them, also, that I've got your book back." He handed a sealed manila envelope across the desk that separated us. "We're making real progress building good relations with the Committee for an Honorable Peace. Gosh, if there's anyone who wants peace, it's soldiers. I'm glad to have the chance to explain that to people in the community."

I would eventually provide him with many opportunities to explain the army's behavior, opportunities that I would extend even more so to the army's lawyers, its Inspector General, and the officers throughout the fort's administration. Ten million Americans were soon to gather on one weekend day in autumn in villages, towns, and cities across the continent, demanding an end to war. In the face of the greatest national dissent the country had ever known, the military drafted and drafted and drafted, wrenching the nation's teenage youth from mothers and fathers, brothers and sisters, friends and kin, who watched with dread the caskets streaming home. And with the draft, the dissent flowed into the military. I was lifted on its tide.

I did not want to take the booklet back to the barracks in Basic, where recruits were subject to frequent inspections. "Could I leave this with you and pick it up after Basic?" I asked the chaplain. "I just needed it back because it has my banker's address in it."

"Not a problem," the chaplain said. "Stop by any time after you graduate." The chapel was on the same end of the fort's administrative core as the hospital, the northernmost in a string of chapels spaced across the base's sprawl, and farthest from base housing, whether barracks buildings for recruits or lifer quarters in the south-side housing compounds. Farthest from the Sunday population, it was the least used of the several chapels. But being close to the JAG complex, it provided a convenient sanctuary for soldiers at odds with the military; at least, it did so in the afternoons after the chaplain left and I had installed myself in the choir loft, a detail man, in charge.

I stopped by the hospital to kill time with Cantell after leaving the chaplain. He was in a foul mood. "There's a huge concert down in Big Sur this weekend," he said. "A bunch of the folk rock groups are going to play. But I'm stuck with weekend duty. Nobody'll switch off with me."

"I would if I could," I said.

"Yeah, I know you would. Anything to get out of Basic. But fat chance, huh?" Cantell signed out for a coffee break and we walked out to the parking lot and leaned

against his van. "It's the first time I've seen you in a uniform," Cantell said. "I almost didn't recognize you."

"Army green makes everybody look about the same," I said. "Except for these buzz cuts they give us in Basic. Anybody can tell I'm going through boot camp."

Cantell suddenly brightened. "Unless you're wearing a wig," he said. "How'd you like to get out of Basic for the weekend."

"Yeah, sure. How?"

Cantell was unlocking the van. "I've got a wig in here somewhere, normal hair style. It'll fit army regs with a little trimming." He was searching in his trunk. "Friday night, after the lifers leave, tell the duty clerk you've got to go to the hospital. Act really sick, like you've got food poisoning or something. Gag all over his desk if you have to. I'll have you all written up for admission."

"And then?"

"I'll admit you for observation pending seeing a doctor. Only there won't be a doctor around for you to see. Trust me on that. They'll be long gone. Then you pop on the wig, take my place in the office, and I'll go to the concert. Sunday night, I check you out, you go back to Basic, and nobody knows it even happened."

"I don't know," I said.

"I thought you were an actor," Cantell said. "Just sit at the desk and act like me. Nothing happens around here on weekends. And if anybody at Basic checks, you'll be legally admitted as a patient. Hell, you'll even be the one answering the phone."

So we did it, with some refinements. When an officer asked for Cantell late that Saturday afternoon while he was partying in Big Sur, I said that I had been sent over from holdover barracks to relieve him. "I just got here, on my way in from Asia," I said. "But something's up with my orders." I thought of the scenes I had played as the British aide in Mohan Mohan's soap opera. "Anyway, they said when I checked in I could do something useful here at the hospital. What can I do for you, sir?"

"I needed to see Cantell," the officer said. "It can wait. But I want to see him as soon as he's back on duty." It was the only challenge I faced that weekend, and I felt little difference between the British soldier with a heliotrope medal that I had played for Mohan Mohan and the orderly I played for Cantell in the base hospital. I kept the hospital smock on, covering my name on my shirt plus the fact that I wore no rank on my sleeve, and when Cantell returned, we drank a beer together and he checked me out of the hospital. "Incredible," Cantell said as he drove me back to Basic. "You weren't anywhere you weren't supposed to be, and you weren't anybody but you the whole time, and you bailed on a whole weekend of Basic. The army's so full of loopholes." His voice trailed off. "Hey, weren't you going to find me some way to get discharged when you were doing all that reading over at JAG?"

"I've got notes," I said. "Lots of notes. Wait till I get out of Basic." The notes were in the van with us, stored with the things I had left with Cantell. Eventually, when I got established at the chapel, I moved them into the choir loft, and they may still be there, considerably expanded and long outdated. The choir loft was never used, but it had loose-leaf notebooks with sheets of music for a choir that never formed. I stored my notes between the sheet music, filling notebook after notebook as my clientele grew. The loft itself was small, nailed up into the entry end of the chapel as if in afterthought. Steep,

narrow stairs with a tiny landing that turned ninety degrees made it troublesome for the overweight chaplain to climb up there, and after I took over as detail man, I found an old coat-tree that I stored on the tiny landing to further block access. "I'll bring it down by the door for Sunday service," I told the chaplain, "and during the week, it'll be out of the way up on the landing."

"Plus it's an antique," the chaplain added. "It looks nice displayed up there." His was a gentle nature, with a penchant for affirming the best in anyone he met, and I hope that he has never discovered the ruse I operated in his chapel under the cover of our comradeship. But I needed cover. Beyond the sanctuary of the chapel, I was a target, as surely as I would have been had I gone creeping through Vietnam's jungles, radio in hand, the destination the army intended for me. Lifers throbbed with hatred for the Insurgent General, or for his activities before the first newscast gave them a name to despise, and when I moved among them, ever at the edge of discovery, I sensed that what awaited me at their hands would be far worse than the barracks beating I had taken that first day. We were a nation severely fractured, and inside the army, the hatred for dissent was stark and palpable.

When the final day of Basic came, a Saturday, the drill sergeant stood us in formation in front of the barracks and dispersed us by group, according to our orders. The largest group by far had orders to advanced infantry training; that group was formed up, handed over to a new drill sergeant, and marched away. Smaller groups were destined for clerk training, for motor pool, for cooks and MPs, and finally, just the sergeant and I were left standing in front of the barracks.

"I knew you'd get something like this," he said, "as soon as I saw your file when you checked in. You know what radio man is?"

"Not really," I said.

"You set up out in front of the lines someplace where Charlie's likely to sneak up on the company. When you spot them, you call in the location and we bomb them. Only nobody ever spots Charlie. He spots you." The sergeant had one hand on his hip, the other held my orders. "Just so you know, I don't agree with them giving you this. You turned yourself in, and everybody deserves a fresh start."

"So you know I didn't report when I got drafted?"

"Knew it right from the first day. You've got orders for Vietnam, too, simultaneous with finishing radio training. You ship right out. I've never seen anything like it." The sergeant was a mid-career lifer, an infantryman who had done tours in Germany, Korea and Vietnam. "Does this have anything to do with that letter about you I got from the Inspector General?"

"It might," I said. "I had a run-in with the MPs my first day here."

"Whatever it was," the sergeant said, "one of them fixed you good. He must have been connected down at Personnel. Just stay dead quiet when you're out there with the radio. Don't even slap at a mosquito." He reached out to hand me the orders. I did not move, and he stood there with his arm extended, my orders fluttering in a mild breeze.

"I can't accept those, sergeant," I said.

"You what?"

"I can't accept those orders. You said they include orders to Vietnam. I can't accept them."

"Like hell you won't take them. You're not sticking me with a problem like that."

"I didn't say I wouldn't, sergeant. I said I can't."

"Oh, hell. I got a golf game this afternoon."

"It's not really a problem you have to deal with, sergeant."

The sergeant wheeled around, his back to me, and kicked at the grass. "Not really my problem? You refuse orders to Vietnam, and you tell me it's not really my problem?"

"It's not, sergeant." I spoke to his back. "I didn't refuse orders. I said I couldn't accept them. There's a difference."

"Well, suppose you just tell me what it is, young barracks lawyer!" The sergeant had turned back towards me and was hovering in my face.

"I would accept them if I could," I said, "but I can't. *Can't* means I'm unable to, and the army doesn't consider not doing what you can't do a refusal. The regulations also say that in situations like this, the matter should be referred to an officer. It won't have to hold up your golf game, sergeant."

"Except where in the hell at Ft. Ord can anybody find an officer on a Saturday?" the sergeant said. But he was beginning to see his way cleanly out of the situation. He packed me, my duffel bag of gear, and my orders into a jeep and drove me to another section of the base. "Stay in the jeep," he said, and stopped in front of a command post surrounded by more of Ft. Ord's ubiquitous green barracks. He disappeared inside, and emerged a few minutes later. "This is Company C, Special Processing Unit," he said. He jerked my duffel out of the jeep and dropped it on the ground. "That's the holdover barracks right there. You're Company C's problem now. Go find yourself a bunk." He gunned the jeep away as soon as I was out of it, leaving me standing by my duffel, my orders inside, on the desk in the duty clerk's in-basket. That is as close as I recall ever getting to those orders. I never actually read them.

Chapter Twenty

The chaplain thought it his great good fortune, or perhaps he called it his blessing, when I stopped by the next day to tell him that I was lodged in a holdover unit. "The drill sergeant told me somebody must've interfered with my orders at Personnel," I said. "It could be a long time before everything straightens out. Nice sermon, by the way."

"I'm glad you liked it. I was a little nervous that some of my Bible quotes were too obscure." Even in Basic, we had been allowed time off on weekends to attend services. Sunday morning chapel hours were an almost sure way, temporarily, to escape whatever it was the army was doing to a person. The chaplain happily phoned the duty clerk at Company C and asked that I be assigned to chapel detail "for the duration". The duty clerk wanted his request in writing, and I sat down at the chaplain's office typewriter and wrote the memo for him.

"Terrific, you type, too," the chaplain said. "I'm a hunt and peck man myself. I'm always behind in the paperwork."

"We'll get it all caught up," I said. "I was a scriptwriter before the army." The chaplain rubbed his hands together, beamed, and poured coffee.

Cantell was less thrilled when I wandered by the hospital late the next afternoon. "Holdovers get weekend duty all the time," he said. "You'll be stuck on base every week." He had finished his day's duty, and we drove into Monterey to spend the long summer evening fishing off an old pier on Cannery Row. Seagulls were perched on posts along the pier, a decaying, private dock with faded "no trespassing" signs nailed up along its length. Below, a sea lion had pulled itself up to sun on a wrecked segment of cement slab which winter waves had left stranded on a pile of beach rocks.

"It's only until JAG figures out how to handle the curve ball I threw at them," I said. "I've got to come up with something else pretty quick."

"I still don't get why they haven't just tossed you in the slammer," Cantell said. "There're lots of guys in the stockade for a whole lot less."

"It's from the regs I researched before I went to Basic. I'm claiming that when the drill sergeant tried to hand me my orders, I couldn't reach out and take them."

"Why not? Nobody was holding your arms."

"That's the loophole in the reg. It doesn't say that a soldier has to be physically unable to do something. It only distinguishes between something he can't do, and something he's unwilling to do." One of the perched gulls screeched and flew out over the bay.

"So why you can't do it doesn't matter?"

"Officially, no. The captain at Company C about put the phone through the window when JAG told him that. He yelled something about it meaning that nobody would have to obey orders anymore and the whole army would collapse."

"But technically, according to JAG, you didn't refuse the order?" Cantell was having a hard time accepting the paper-thin legality I had invoked. The other gulls had noted the first one's squawk, and had launched in fast pursuit. The sea lion was thrust up on his flippers and staring after the sea gulls.

"Right - I would have had to tell the drill sergeant I *wouldn't* accept the orders. If I'd said that I wouldn't, they could court martial me."

"So what happens next?"

"For now, I clean the chapel everyday." The sea gulls dived, hitting the water in the middle of the bay. Further up Cannery Row, a fishing boat put quickly out. The sea lion slid off the rocks and disappeared under water.

"Something's up," Cantell said. He had grown up on California's beaches. More gulls were flying in to join the first group. "Look at how the water's roiling out there." We watched while the fishing boat chugged towards the gulls. The sea lion poked his head up, checked the position of the gulls, and disappeared again. Two men on the fishing boat were rigging a boom with a net. Cantell watched them closely. Just before the boat reached the gulls, the fishermen lowered the net into the water and dragged it straight beneath the congregated gulls.

"Squid," Cantell said. "It's a squid run." The boat stopped, its winch turned on, and the net was pulled up and swung over the boat. The back of the boat was pulled almost to the waterline by the weight and swing of the bulging net. The fishermen emptied the net, re-rigged, and dipped again. Another bulging load was hauled in. After a third dip, the boat was so low in the water that it had to come back in to offload.

"Don't get too comfy," Cantell said, returning to our conversation about my orders. "You can bet they've got somebody writing a whole new reg on this one." But it was not to be so simple for the military as writing a new reg. Except for the chaplain, the army did not then yet know about Edna and the CHP. The ladies were ecstatic.

"If we'd just had a law like this during McCarthy," one of them said. "There'd never have been a blacklist." Ed was grilling lightly that evening, steaks for the two of us only. The ladies who were gathered on the patio claimed to be watching their respective weights.

"More beer for us," Ed said, motioning me over to the grill. "Once they get started on McCarthy, they forget all about eating anyway." He pointed towards the cooler with his long grill spatula and I opened fresh bottles. "Are you sure you know what you're doing?"

"Not at all," I said. "But somebody monkeyed with my orders. I'm not getting a fair shake."

"Think about what just one sergeant was able to pull on you," Ed said. "Now the lifers are going to be all sitting around at the NCO Club talking about this reg you've come up with. They'll all be out to get you now. Once they figure out who you are." It was good advice, but Edna was calling to me.

"One of our group members has a lawyer husband," she said. "If you're right about this regulation, we could stop the whole war!" She was aglow with anticipation, or perhaps it was just reflections on her cheeks from the flare of flames leaping up as the fat off the grilling steaks splattered down onto Ed's coals. She had my arm gripped in both hands, holding me in front of the ladies. There would be no more friendly meetings between the CHP and the chaplain. Those would now grow adversarial, and the chaplain would berate himself to me in the office, wondering why he could no longer communicate effectively with the civilians he wanted so much to call his friends.

Cantell was right about the weekends; there were many on which I was assigned extra duty. Without it, I would have gone much more often with him to the Fillmore, and then, I am certain, Carol and I would have crossed again with each other much sooner.

Then, perhaps, I would have pursued the army less stridently, been less unbending, been softer at the edges of my moral certitude. But that is in the territory of events that did not happen. So much of the feeling for Carol that I have kept alive all these years dwells in a geography of what did not happen, and like the army, I try to deal with that which did.

I had hoisted the army upon the spear point of its own regulations. It was bound by its legal procedures to start with the event that had happened - that I had been unable to accept the orders, and it was up to its investigators to prove that I could have accepted them. The difficult burden of disproof was theirs, made more difficult by the weekend duty I was frequently assigned. The duty clerk at Company C even began to do me small favors when he could. I never complained about the assignments he gave me, assignments such as Saturday duty answering the phone at JAG, and so he often gave me first choice on the list of weekend duties he had to fill.

"Keep the door locked," the JAG officer who showed me my telephone duties ordered me. "You're here to answer the phone, not to deal with walk-ins. They can come back Monday." He spent a great deal of time showing me the correct way to fill out the yellow message forms. He went into an inner office, called me from a phone behind a closed door, and then checked my note-taking. "Just like that. Exactly like that," he said. "Any message that comes in, exactly like you just did." Then he was gone for the day. In one of the file cabinets, I found a set of keys that unlocked the doors to the private offices of the JAG lawyers, and in one of the offices, I found my file. It was thin that first time I read through it.

It already contained, however, a copy of the report filed by the FBI agent who had interviewed me after the college demonstration. It came with the famous black lines of deleted material that so many were to laugh about when laws later made it possible for citizens to get copies of their personal files from the government. My first thought was to obscure the report by marking it heavily with more black deletions. But the morning wore on to afternoon, the phone did not ring, and the JAG compound was empty. Plus, it was a simple report.

There was a cover page on letterhead, two middle pages on plain stationary and a final page with a half paragraph and a signature on it. I checked through the offices and found a typewriter with the same font as the report, then I matched up the stationary from the supply in an officer's desk, and I retyped the middle two pages. Wherever deletions occurred in the original report I carefully included words of equal spacing that I could cross out with a heavy dark marker, and by afternoon's end, I had three altered versions typed up and ready to substitute for the original. "Which one would you go with, Mohan?" I asked out loud as the afternoon drew to a close. I imagined Mohan Mohan setting up a trial scene, an Indian barrister rising to make subtle mockery of a British judiciary that dripped with sweat in its wigs and long black robes. "You always did like best the versions I liked least." I chose the rewrite that equivocated the most, and placed the two new pages between the cover page and the signature page of the original. In the rewrite, the agent reported that he had been sent to interview me in error, and there was no further action recommended.

Events never culminated in my coming to trial, such as I imagined might happen that afternoon when I was reflecting on how Mohan Mohan would frame the scene. When I was back in India, however, I did use the incident to write a story idea that I gave to

Mohan Mohan, and he happily commissioned a script. "You've grown, Paul," he said. "You've grown. Now you understand India." The story was about an Indian flag bearer, serving in the British army, whom all the colonial officers considered an illiterate bootlicker. Unbeknownst to them, however, he is a well-connected operative for the independence movement who slips misinformation into the British army's intelligence reports on Gandhi's movements.. The movie played to mild success in the B-grade cinema houses of Bombay and Calcutta, but lacked the music, dancing and theatrics that is essential to the A-list movies. But I am ever struck by how one thing links to another, though displaced in time and context, and then leads back around again. Certainly, I was not thinking about future movie scripts when I was doctoring files in the JAG office those various weekends.

Edna's enthusiasm for the CHP had eclipsed her interest in healthy eating. She was happily crunching potato chips the night I met with her friend's lawyer husband. Ed was not there that night, off at some civic function important to his business and landing new clients. The grill was quiet, the patio smokeless.

"There's a lot here," the lawyer said. "A lot. More than you know. I worked on the defense for Aptheker, you know."

"For who?"

"One of the victims of McCarthy," Edna said. She emptied the second of a twin pack of chips into a large bowl on the patio table. "He'd have got the death penalty, but Jerry found some law. They had to drop the death penalty."

"Oh, you give me too much credit, Edna," Jerry said. "But there's an issue here. *Habeas corpus*. If we can file you *habeas corpus*, then federal law applies. We can go all the way to the Supreme Court."

"And how long will that take?" I asked.

"Don't worry about that," Edna said. "We know Justice Douglas. Jerry was his law clerk when he interned in law school." Jerry's hair was already silver, but I did not question if the connection to Justice Douglas was still fresh. Jerry was thin, with a long, pointed nose that seemed to drive home his proofs when he paused in his sentences and bobbed his head.

Thus was born for the CHP "Our Supreme Court Case", which would purge for those kind ladies the long, bitter aftertaste of McCarthyism. "The army has physical custody of you," Jerry explained. He glanced at the fence. "Even though I think you're technically AWOL at the moment. That's what *habeas corpus* means - to have the body. In federal court, we can argue that they have to give you orders you can accept or they have to release you from custody."

"The army won't change the orders," I said.

"Exactly," Jerry said. "They've got to go for victory. If the Supreme Court orders them to either change the orders or to release you, anybody can follow your path. So the army will try to prevail." He looked straight and hard at me. "Once I file this, don't accept any other orders in place of these. Can I count on you?"

"I have nothing else to count on," I said. "But what if they just rewrite the reg?"

"There's why we've got to get into federal court. I'll get an injunction that'll keep the reg in force until the case is decided. And not just for you. It'll keep the reg in force for

anyone who's drafted in the interim. So you can't accept substitute orders, no matter what they offer. They'd have a chance to rewrite the reg."

It was a clever argument, and it had a real chance of winning, of changing the course of history, of stopping a pitiful war in its unjust tracks. I read the memos piling up in my file in the JAG office as word of the case reached the Pentagon and the generals there appealed to the Attorney General to find a way to derail Jerry and the CHP. They were desperate that a solution be found before the case wended through federal courts and wound up before Justice Douglas. Jerry really was connected. I saw the generals' memos bemoaning it.

So, had I found Carol again sooner, Edna might have had the longed for vindication of her father's humiliation. And Aptheker did not get the death penalty. What comfort is there, really, in those events that do not happen? I cannot now think of Edna without remembering her excitement as she clutched my arm that one night, holding me in front of the CHP, her face aglow in the flicker of the fat dropping into the fire.

But as the dead ends of searching for Carol piled up, the resolve U Tu had instilled in me deepened, hardened, became ramrod straight. Jerry backed the army's lawyers into corner after corner, his skills honed by decades of championing lost causes, and Edna's anticipation blossomed. I pursued my separate course, my mornings given to making it ever easier for the chaplain to go home to baby-sit his sons, and my afternoons given to turning the whispers of dissent in the barracks into voices, into actions, into finding for each and every draftee who desired it, a way out. In time, I became brazen.

"The lifers know the regs," I told Cantell. He was sitting in the choir loft with me, goldbricking away part of a rainy afternoon, stretching a ten-minute errand into an hour. "That's their advantage. Draftees don't know them, and even if they knew where to find them, most guys don't read well enough to understand them." Neither did they write well enough to pursue the grievance solutions the army provided to those in the know.

"It's damned nice of you to help all these guys out," Cantell said. Several of the choir notebooks in which I kept track of the individuals I was helping were laid out on a choir bench. Cantell was stretched out on the other end of the bench, his head pillowed on a stack of the notebooks. He picked one up and opened it, then read for awhile. "Let me see if I understand this Parker case," Cantell said. "You're saying he can decide to not show up for duty, but as long as he never leaves the base, the worst he can get is an Article Fifteen?"

"Right. As long as he can prove he was on the base, it's not AWOL, it's not desertion. It's just not being in his assigned place. And that's not a court-martial offense for someone still in training."

"So how long's he been doing this?"

"Forty-five days I think," I answered. "I just make sure he signs in somewhere on base everyday - the hospital, a chapel, a mess hall he's not assigned to. There just has to be a continuous record that he was here during duty hours."

"But where's he sleep?" Cantell asked. "Why don't they just nab him when he comes back to barracks?"

I pointed to the far end of the chapel. "See where it's built out in the ceiling over the altar," I said. "That's a little attic inside there. The only way in is to go back of the

sacristy to the latrine, stand on the toilet, and pop up through the ceiling crawl space. Even if he could get up there, the chaplain wouldn't fit through."

"So how does Parker get in?"

"There's a window up there, like this one." I motioned towards the choir loft window. "I leave it unlocked, and every night, after dark, Parker climbs up the tree in back, shinnies out a limb, and comes in through the window."

Cantell raised up off the choir bench. "Hey, Parker," he yelled. "Parker? You in there?" There was no answer. Cantell settled back onto the choir bench.

"And since he's not AWOL, these days will count towards getting his discharge? Unbelievable." It was one of Cantell's favorite words for referring to the army. "When are you coming to San Francisco with me again?"

"This week if you're going."

"Hey, I'm always going. You're the one that's busy every weekend."

"I've got a meeting up there Saturday morning with some group the CHP's forming an alliance with. The rest of the time, we can party."

It was that meeting that took me, eventually, around all the dead ends to finding Carol. My fellow thespian, Jane Fonda, had already marched at Ft. Carson, standing at the gates to draw national attention to GI dissidents who were getting harsh courts-martial sentences for minute infractions of military law. Mohammed Ali, the world's heavyweight boxing champion, had declared he had no quarrel with the Vietnamese people and would not submit to the draft. The swelling peace movement, joined by veterans returned from Vietnam and disgusted with the war's conduct, had embraced a new tactic. They would target the military's training bases with the messages of peace. Thus was born Armed Farces Day, and with it, the Insurgent General.

Running my chapel office, I sought no title, no rank, no special reward. My mind often drifted to U Tu and the weeks we had spent in Bangkok putting in place his communications network for his dispatches from the jungle. I imagined him successful in his efforts, and I hoped that if he could know of my own efforts, he would approve. "In a true democracy," U Tu had preached, "everyone gets the help they need." So I helped, convinced that the greatest sin was to be able to help, but not to do so.

My afternoons became filled with meetings. Word spread by mouth among the dissident and the disaffected of Ft. Ord of the chapel lawyer who listened, who helped, who got results. My case load grew, and the forty-five minutes I could steal at the JAG offices doing research during the lunch hour were no longer enough. In the chaplain's name, I made an appointment to send over a chapel assistant to do research for sermons. At a Goodwill store, I bought a dress uniform that still bore a corporal's stripes and the name tag of a discharged veteran. A marksman's medal still dangled on its little ribbon from the lapel pocket. I donned the same wig I had used when I substituted for Cantell at the hospital, and capped the disguise off with a pair of heavy-rimmed reading glasses from a Woolworth's store.

"What's the penalty for impersonating a corporal?" Cantell asked as he helped me get ready for my first research mission. I think he expected me to have regs ready that would get me out of any mess.

"Actually, I could get a court martial for this one," I said. "The military is very picky about wearing stripes you haven't earned." We added some cotton balls to puff out my

cheeks, and under my shirt, to bulk out my chest, I wrapped myself in a bath towel that Cantell found in his van. The distance from the chapel to JAG was only a few blocks, and after my first visit, I returned, in my disguise, at will. My greatest difficulty was taking care that my wig did not shift when I removed my hat upon entering JAG. That and the cotton balls. I often wished that I had never started with the cotton balls.

Case begot case, but the chaplain had so accustomed the fort to calling only in the morning that I was rarely disturbed. On rare occasions an officer or lifer would turn onto the chapel walkway outside, and I would caution whomever I was counseling to absolute silence. Then I would start down the stairs, grab a broom I kept positioned behind the antique coat tree, and sweep the lower steps, swooshing as much dust as possible towards the door and the incoming visitor. "Pretty dirty up here," I would say as I put the broom aside and trotted down the steps to see how I could help. My daily ritual, after I vacuumed the chapel in the morning, was to wait for the chaplain to say goodbye for the day with, "Call me if you need me. The number's by the phone." Then I would unzip the cleaner bag and scatter handfuls of the collected dust on the choir loft steps. So though I grew brazen, I did not grow lax. Ed's advice was right. The lifers were closing in on me, and if I had grown lax, I would be dead.

Gonzalez, or a case like Gonzalez, seems to me now to have been inevitable. I am not sure how or when the lifers figured out my operation. Certainly, they never knew the extent of it. But they were patient, and they did not intend for me to get another chance to buck their work up to officers. I had undone the radioman's hell in Vietnam one of their kind had sentenced me to, and his friends closed ranks for him. They even used Cantell to lure me in. It was a well-planned trap, almost perfectly sprung. Except Gonzalez had skills they did not know about. Perhaps he was just an illiterate bootlicker to them. They kicked him around enough.

In the broader world, beyond the narrow confines of the lifers in their NCO Club, the President's "secret plan to end the war" was the butt of jokes on late night TV, and splinter groups from the peace movement had turned violent. The governor of California, Ronald Reagan, had already gassed demonstrators in People's Park, where uncounted thousands, who had been herded at gunpoint into a makeshift prison of stockade fencing and concertina wire, were held without rights. We were close to Nixon's invasion of Cambodia, which would explode not only in those far jungles but across the university landscape of America. Before it was over, four students would lay dead on the ground at Kent State, and America would finally pause, finally pull back from the rhetoric, and finally wonder what had gone wrong.

"We've got to have publicity," Edna told me in the early days of the CHP. She meant for my case, but Jerry was against it.

"Too soon, and the army will just discharge Paul," Jerry said. "We've got to get them tied up in a constitutional issue so there isn't such a simple way out for them. Keep a low profile, and then, strike hard." His head bobbed forward, his nose jabbing at Edna. Once again, Ed was not on the patio with us, but I had not yet begun to wonder if Edna was scheduling our meetings at times such that Ed would not discover the depth of her newly regenerated commitment to the CHP.

"I think the army knows the stakes," I said. I had already read some of the early memos from the Pentagon, where there was deep concern that my case had been accepted

in a federal court in San Francisco. "They're very afraid that *habeas corpus* will get contagious." I parceled out the information I gleaned surreptitiously in the JAG office, never telling Jerry directly what I was doing, but giving him foreknowledge of the responses he could expect as Jerry and the JAG lawyers dueled with legal briefs.

"They should be afraid," Jerry said. "If I win the right for soldiers to plead *habeas corpus*, the military will be subject to the same laws that ordinary citizens are."

But Edna would not give up on her desire for publicity. Perhaps she had garnered a taste for it with the promotion of her book. More likely, she hungered for the day that the CHP would provide a platform for exonerating her father, and the other victims of McCarthyism whose families underwrote the CHP's activities. So I fed Edna a hand-picked selection of Ft. Ord's disaffected. They told me their stories, I wrote their scripts, and we rehearsed in the chapel choir loft. Then I sent them to Edna and the CHP.

The first on TV was Prentiss, filmed telling his story to Edna in the basement of the City Lights bookstore, where I had met Edna that first night. "When I got to the rifle range, I just couldn't fire the gun," Prentiss said, his back to the camera.

"Why not?" Edna quizzed. She had pinned a large white peace button on a satiny black blouse, striving for maximum contrast on the black and white television of those days.

"It was just the way my mother raised me," Prentiss said. "We went to a church where the minister always said all creatures are God's creatures."

"Do you think you're a conscientious objector?" Edna asked.

"I don't know. I just don't want to kill. I'm not like that." Prentiss was following his script; Edna was asking the right questions.

"What happened next?"

"There's a basement at the barracks. It has a cement floor. The sergeant sent me down there with a wire brush and a metal bucket, and told me to scrub the floor until I was ready to shoot a rifle. There wasn't any water in the bucket. He just made me scoot it across the floor."

"How long did you scrub?" Edna asked, gently.

"Three days. Three days on my knees with the sound of the wire scraping across the cement. And then the jangle of the bucket. That's how the sergeant kept track of me. If he didn't hear the jangle of that bucket, he came down and made me give him fifty." The camera zoomed in on Prentiss and his quivering hands. After the interview aired, Edna brought Prentiss to the chaplain, demanding that he certify Prentiss a conscientious objector, and the chaplain promised to look into the matter. But I did not see Prentiss much after that. His mother's church raised money to hire a lawyer; the lawyer pushed the case through the army's paperwork labyrinth, and Prentiss spoke briefly one evening at a CHP fund raiser, a success story who had his discharge and was flying home the next day. And I wondered whom the army would send to Vietnam in place of Prentiss.

"More cases," Edna urged me. "More cases. The TV stations say they'll send a crew anytime." So I sent them, and Edna learned to use the interviews. The insignia of the CHP became entwined with the peace symbol, dates and contacts for CHP functions were worked into the dialogues, and Edna hired the upstairs of an old warehouse on Cannery Row to hold the ever-larger public meetings of the CHP. But I rarely attended. That was too public. I did not grow lax.

I continued to meet with Edna on her patio, taking the back route through the sand dunes, slipping through the housing compound and sliding under the fence. I went alone, never taking, by that route, any of the cases I was preparing for Edna's interviews.

"I never know when you're going to show up," Edna said to me one night. "I come out here sometimes, very late at night, and I get the feeling you've been here. Sometimes, I'm just sure of it."

"Sometimes I have," I said. "I come here sometimes just to be off the base. Off the base and someplace safe. I sit over there behind the grill and think about things."

"About what things? You never tell me about yourself. It's always about somebody you're helping, some case we're going to interview next. What about you?"

"I've been looking for somebody," I said. "An old girl friend. I thought I'd find her by now."

"People don't just disappear. You must have some clues where she is."

"Dead ends," I said. "We didn't really spend a lot of time together. So I don't have much to go on."

"Are you still in love with her?"

"I'm not sure we actually had time to fall in love. I wonder about that. About what happens to love that buds, but never gets its chance to bloom." Behind me a full moon was probing up and over the horizon. I saw my shadow begin to grow across the patio towards where Edna was sitting.

"Let's watch the moon come up," Edna said. It rose large, the night sky clear, and we watched until it was round and bright just over the treetops. "Why does the moon always look so much bigger on the horizon?" Edna asked. I knew the answer, but I did not think Edna wanted to hear it. Not really.

It was after Jane Fonda stood up for the GIs at Ft. Carson that the acting troupe in San Francisco got involved. They saw one of Edna's interviews, called the phone number, and showed up at the next meeting of the CHP at the Cannery Row warehouse. They wanted to do guerilla theatre. Cantell and I sat in the rear, well-disguised, and howled and laughed along with the crowd as the troupe lampooned the army. We had parked Cantell's van nearby, and I remember being uneasy about that. I knew from the JAG files that the army was monitoring the meetings.

The next weekend, Cantell and I drove up to San Francisco in the same van, and I met with the actors. Their idea was straightforward. Each year, the military invited the public onto its bases on a spring Saturday to celebrate Armed Forces Day. "We'll turn it into Armed Farces Day," their leader said. "The CHP will bring out a large crowd of peace activists to mix in on the base," he continued. "The troupe will be in the crowd in twos and threes. We'll form up all of a sudden, do an anti-war skit, and then fade back into the crowd. Just like the Viet Cong."

"I wouldn't put it that way if you get a preview of this on TV," I said. "There's guys there at the fort that would seriously injure you for saying that."

"That's why we need somebody we can trust on the inside. You've got to pick the points where we can form up and act, but fade away quick if things go wrong." He threw a fist in the air, apropos of nothing, a black power salute although he was not black.

"And I wouldn't throw off black power salutes on base, either. You're not in that club."

"Exactly, exactly. You know the ropes, bro'. We don't. We're just there to act."

Edna wanted the actors, and she wanted to promote Armed Farces Day. "Donations doubled after that last meeting," she told me. "We signed up twenty new members the next day alone. The Methodists are talking about joining up with us. We could get national TV if we make this work."

"You can't let that actor guy speak for the CHP," I said. "He doesn't have a clue. He's just acting. We're just another stage to that bunch."

"Then you do the talking," Edna said. "This is important. This is the tide rising for all that we've worked for. The CHP can't pass it up."

I did not point out to her that tiny groups of actors trotting out three-minute parodies at odd moments here and there around Ft. Ord would not stop the war. I knew that it was for her father and his compatriots that she felt that the tide was at last rising, and it did not bother me that she had mixed these causes. She was a good woman, married to a good man, and that was enough. I became the Insurgent General, and I spoke for the CHP.

We did the first of the interviews in a small loft the troupe rented somewhere in San Francisco's Tenderloin district, following their self-imposed directive to deliver theatre to the people. Cantell dropped me several blocks away, and I approached wearing the Che Guevara disguise. The troupe had talked some Black Panther Party members into standing guard outside the building. Edna's station wagon was parked conspicuously in front. One of the Black Panthers stepped in front of me as I reached the entrance.

"I'm with the troupe," I said.

"Any honkie dressed like that gotta be," his friend said. They let me pass, and I realized that they, too, were there for the show, for the chance to get their cause on television. They were not going to stop anybody from walking past them.

Edna was already set up, wearing a white blazer with the CHP insignia embroidered large on the jacket over her heart. "I thought white would contrast best with your fatigue shirt," she said. She adjusted my shirt at the shoulders, around the pads she had sewn in to make me look more imposing. "Keep your shirt pulled forward during the filming," she said. The troupe had worked up an elaborate skit to do in mime simultaneously with the interview, but television was already addicted to the sound bite. We got fifteen seconds on the news that night, but it played regionally, not only in San Francisco, but in Los Angeles, Portland and Seattle. We had covered the West Coast.

Cantell and I watched it that night in a sparse apartment shared by several members of the troupe. The camera zoomed in on Edna and the CHP insignia. "The Committee for an Honorable Peace announced a new initiative today," the announcer said. The camera pulled back to capture a view of me standing beside her, facing the camera, red bandana and sunglasses obscuring my face.

"We're inviting everyone to join us on the grounds at Ft. Ord for Armed Farces Day," Edna said, holding up a neatly printed sign with the date included on it. "We're going to do guerrilla theatre all over the base."

"And shut down Ft. Ord," I added as three of the troupe's members, women, popped up from where they had been crouching. The camera lingered on them as they swiftly shed army fatigues in favor of the belly-dancing outfits they wore beneath, outfits that

were more skin than anything else. The cameras closed in on their hips, missing the black power salutes they had worked into their dance routine.

"There you have it, straight from the Insurgent General himself," the announcer intoned. "Ft. Ord's going to close." Hips flashed on the screen, and the newscast cut to a commercial.

The troupe was ecstatic. "That's it," the troupe's leader said. "That's all we need. We've been on TV. The gigs are going to roll in now. We're famous."

"But my hips," one of the dancers said. "Did you see my hips? I'm going on a diet immediately."

"Actually, I think that's the way real belly dancers really look," someone responded. "They're not all Twiggied-out like American models. They've got real flesh on them."

"I'm going on a diet anyway. I'm a serious actor, not just a belly dancer."

The gigs did roll in. Edna used the swelling coffers of the CHP to send the troupe to Los Angeles, Portland and Seattle, the outlying cities where the newscast played, and she put out a call for volunteers to keep the CHP's phones open round the clock. The troupe recruited more actresses to join in the belly dancing, and it became the centerpiece of their routine; they learned to be less quick about shedding their fatigues, turning the number into a long tease.

When the troupe got back to San Francisco from its West Coast tour, Armed Farces Day was drawing near. Cantell and I were crashed at the apartment with the troupe members. The floor was bare boards that creaked, the furniture overstuffed throwaways from junk stores.

"Hey, you lost the weight," Cantell said, his hand on the waist of the dancer who disliked her hips. A hole gaped in the fabric of the couch they sat on, showing shredded stuffing.

"We added Bakersfield, San Bernardino and Fresno at the last minute," the dancer answered. "There wasn't time to eat." Old blinds, pulled down over the apartment's two windows, were ripped and let San Francisco's night lights flash through.

"Edna's happy with your tour," I said. "The United Council of Churches is sending busloads from Oregon, Washington, and down south for the demonstration. Then today she got a call from the United Farm Workers. Cesar Chavez is promising several truckloads of workers if the CHP will come out publicly in favor of the grape boycott."

I have wondered if U Tu ever experienced a moment like that, a moment when it seemed as if the tectonic plates of the earth itself would heave up and change everything, change everything through some mystical connection with what was so obviously good, vanquish everything that was so obviously bad. Reading his dispatches that I eventually collected, I do not think things went so well for him.

The troupe was drunk on the power of guerilla theatre, and I did not point out to them that their tour had been ever more carefully orchestrated as professionals from Hollywood contacted the CHP and asked what they could do to further the cause of Armed Farces Day. The troupe was only aware that doors were opening in front of them, and they liked to think that it was their talent and creativity driving their success.

It was Cantell who cooked up the idea that we go to the Fillmore and storm the stage with the troupe's show that night, and the troupe became giddy on the prospects. Jerry Garcia and the Dead were playing the late gig. "If Jerry's not the people, the real people,

then no one is," one of the troupe said. "Guerilla theatre power!" He threw his fist in the air.

"And we've got to have the Insurgent General," Cantell said. "The real Insurgent General. Jerry'd expect no less." He pointed at me as he said it.

His dieting dancer objected. "We're actors," she said. "Real professionals now. We can't have amateurs taking the leads."

But Cantell insisted. "You people just don't know. This guy *is* the Insurgent General. *He really is*." He meant me no harm.

Chapter Twenty One

"It is you! Paul, I knew it was you. Kiss me." Carol was standing in front of me, arms up on my shoulders, hands clasped behind my neck. We were backstage at the Fillmore, the crowd buzzing in reaction to the show within a show we had just put on. The musicians had barely missed a beat, adapting to the strip tease with which the dancers charged onto the stage, and graciously ceding me a microphone as I promised the crowd that together we could put an end to war. Put an end to war. It made a good tag line. I spoke, the teasers danced, and when I paused after "put an end to war" the first time, the guitars riffed.

I spoke more, said the tag line again, and the guitars riffed. The crowd came back around to it along with the guitars. "Put an end to war," they sang. They could dance to that. So I kept at it, promising them magic if they would join the crowds converging on Ft. Ord for Armed Farces Day.

"Jane Fonda is coming," I said, "to put an end to war." The riffs came round.

"Cesar Chavez is coming," I said, "to put an end to war." The riffs came round.

"Joan Baez is coming," I said, "to put an end to war." Whom did I not promise? It ended when Cantell grabbed the microphone from me. "The Insurgent General has come," he shouted, pointing at me, "to put an end to war." He shouted it again, not waiting for the guitars, lost in the glaze of his own enthusiasm, hop-stepping around on the stage, and I saw the band's security men edging in to take the microphone away. I slipped behind one of the belly dancers and descended quickly down a set of back steps, looking for some place to shed my Che Guevara trappings. Carol found me then.

She pulled down the red bandana, took the sunglasses away from eyes. "It is you! Paul, I knew it was you. Kiss me." I put my arms around her waist, and we turned, lightly, dancing away from the stage and behind a curtain, and we kissed.

"I saw you on that news show," Carol said. "I kind of thought it was your voice. Then tonight, there wasn't any doubt. Despite this stuff." Her hand had gone to my hair and pushed loose the wig. I pulled it off.

"I've got to get clear of this outfit," I said. "Then we can talk."

"Follow me," Carol said. She led me to a flight of stairs that went down below the stage area, a basement broken up into dressing rooms, prop areas, and equipment for putting together the elaborate light shows. "If there's one place I know my way around," Carol said, "it's the Fillmore. I'm here all the time."

"I've looked for you," I said. "Ever since I got back."

"I'd given up," Carol said. "I didn't think I'd ever see you again." She led me to one of the dressing rooms. "Give me that stuff." She hung the fatigue shirt on a rack in the first dressing room, tucked the sunglasses into the pocket of someone's shirt in the next room, and placed the wig on a manikin among the props. "I'm keeping the beret," she said. "What kind of trouble are you in now?"

"You saw it," I said. "The Insurgent General. I'll be in prison with the key thrown away forever if they ever put all the pieces together."

"Just like Egypt," she said. "You've pushed things too far, haven't you?"

"Yes."

"Is there any room in what you're doing for us. For us to see if there is an us."

"I hope so," I said. "That's what I came back for. To find out."

Upstairs, the show was breaking up, the band playing its goodnight song to the fans. "I'll need a little time," Carol said. "I'm living with someone, a guy I like a lot."

"It's complicated for me, too," I said. She brushed her hair back with one hand and looked straight into my eyes. "I'm in the army," I told her.

Carol's eyes went distant, then she laughed. "Where else would you be?" she said. "I should have known. In the middle of the beast."

"I can't stick around here much longer," I said. "That stuff up there on the stage was way too public. I shouldn't have done it."

"And if you hadn't, we end up missing each other again." She smiled.

"Khaireldin let me out of jail," I said. "These guys won't. All we'll have is visiting rights if I don't go." Members of the band and their entourage were coming down into the basement and filing by.

"Hey, Carol," one of them said, "coming across the bay to the party tonight?"

"I'll be late," she said, "if I get there." She pulled the red bandana from around my neck and handed it to the friend who had spoken to her. "Take this over to the houseboat for me, will you. The hat, too." She gave him my beret. "Now where is it you need to get to?"

"Ft. Ord," I said. "I go on duty in a few hours."

Unlike Edna, Carol took the interstate, and we sped south. "I want to know what happened in Egypt, and after," Carol said. I liked the glow of the dashboard lights on her skin. "But not like this, all in a rush. I want to hear it slow, how you got from there to here, and with time for all the details."

"Khaireldin told me you left a letter," I said. "But he never gave it to me. What was in it?"

"My address," Carol said. "Khaireldin promised to give it to you. So when you never wrote, when I never heard anything, I assumed you didn't get out…or that you didn't care."

"I cared," I said. "I cared a lot."

"You never said it to me then," Carol said, "and it's been years. I had to get on with my life." We rode for a while in silence, distance passing by us from front to back as once it had in the Ethiopian bus, but accelerated now. As everything was accelerated in America. "When can we get together?" Carol asked.

"Next weekend," I said. "The weekend after that is Armed Farces Day. I'll have to be at the fort for that. The way it's snowballing, they'll probably restrict us all to base anyway."

"I'll pick you up Saturday morning," Carol said. "I know a place down this way, a really beautiful place. Tassahara. There's a Buddhist monastery there."

"A good friend of mine is Buddhist," I said. "Somebody I met after Egypt."

"Shush," Carol said. "I don't want to hear it until you can tell me slow, like the lovemaking you promised me that night on the shore by the mosque at Wadi Halfa."

"When the last rays of the sun were splintering off the crescent."

"And we were going to swim out, but we didn't know about the crocodiles."

Maybe it is the crocodiles that deserve much more of our attention than I, at least, have ever given them. They have endured millions of years upon this earth living by one

simple principle - to devour everything that comes before the sweep of their jaws. A crocodile does not hesitate. We could have driven that night to the Goldmans. My money and my passport were waiting. Canada was less than a day's drive to the north. But if either of us thought it, we neither spoke it.

Cantell was still wired when he finally caught up with me. I had pulled my Sunday duty. He had returned to base in the wee hours for a few hours sleep before his Monday shift at the hospital, and I was finishing up in the chapel Monday afternoon when he stopped in.

"Where'd you disappear to?" he asked. "Wow. Did you miss out or what? Those dancers were so turned on by being up there on that stage. So turned on. I still can't believe it. I'll never go back to LA. Never. San Francisco parties the best."

"She was there," I said. "I found Carol."

"Who?" It took him a moment to focus. "Oh, your African girl friend. Hey, good for you. You deserve it. You were awesome up there."

"We're getting together this weekend. If I can't dodge duty, you've got to step in for me."

"No problem, buddy," Cantell said. "I'm happy for you." He reached out, took my hand and shook it. "Without you around, I'd have gone right over the edge in this place. Right over the edge." We walked out and I locked the chapel door behind us. I looked up to make sure that I had closed the choir loft window. "I've got to get back over to the hospital for a while," Cantell said. I walked around back of the chapel to make sure Parker had not left the attic window by the tree limb open when he had gone out that morning, and wondered if he could possibly make it through all two years of his service without getting caught. I came back around the chapel on the other side and saw Cantell walking back towards the hospital, well up the street. A jeep carrying two MPs was pulled up across from the chapel, both MPs with their heads turned towards Cantell. I stepped into a clump of tall, scraggly hydrangea bushes growing in the yard, their big leaves blending with my army fatigues.

I watched the MPs; the MPs watched Cantell. When Cantell turned behind a building further up the street, the MPs started the jeep and drove up to the building around which Cantell had disappeared, then parked again. I slipped back through the shrubbery to the rear of the chapel and climbed the oak in back, entering the chapel by Parker's route. I dropped down through the latrine, went up to the choir loft and shoved all the choir benches back, then rolled up the carpet. One by one, I went through the choir notebooks, pulling out the notes of all the cases I had worked and spreading them evenly on the boards of the choir loft floor. Then I rolled out the carpet over them, and replaced the choir benches. While I worked, I heard Parker open and shut the window as he entered the attic for the night.

Light was faded in the loft, but I finished up in the growing dark, turning on no lights. I did not grow lax. At the last moment, I noticed the corporal's dress uniform I used for my visits to JAG, hanging on the railing at the top of the stairwell. I grabbed the uniform and the dress shoes that went with it and took them back to the sacristy. In the latrine I climbed up on the toilet and tapped on the crawlspace cover, twice with a two-second count between the taps. "Parker," I said. "It's me. Help me with this stuff."

I sensed more than saw the cover being raised over my head. Parker leaned over me, the glow of a single birthday candle lighting his black skin. "Gimme what you got, bro'," he said. He reached a hand down and took the uniform. I handed up the shoes, and then he reached down, grabbing me by the back of my shirt collar and boosting me as I pulled myself up into the attic.

"Something's not right," I said. "Keep your ears open, and be really quiet up here tonight."

"Quiet as a mouse," Parker said. We pulled the mattress Parker had scavenged from a barracks over top of the crawlspace cover. "Sometimes I think this thing got fleas," Parker said.

"Fleas might be the least of our worries," I said. "I saw MPs checking stuff out."

"They're not getting up here," Parker said. "I'll be sleeping right on top this cover." He blew the candle out. Faint light trickled in the window from a street light. I looked out into the yard.

"It's all in shadow out there," I said. "You won't be able to see them if they come snooping around."

"They won't get in either. That window locks."

"Make sure you lock it then. What I want you to do is to listen for anything that sounds like there's searching going on in the choir loft."

"Better than that, bro'. I can see. I got a little peek hole over there underneath where the cross is hung on the outside. I've watched you a lot working away up there in the choir."

"I'm counting on you, Parker. I've got to know if anything strange happens over there." It was too dark in the attic to see Parker, but he reached out and squeezed my shoulder.

"Anything bad happens, I'll drop one of these birthday candles straight down below the window," Parker said. "If it's bad enough I got to get out, I'll leave another candle right there where the tree limb joins the trunk."

"Okay, but be careful. That window squeaks."

"Not if I got to leave it won't." We waited by the window, studying the shadows in the yard. Parker slid the sash up, slowly, patiently, silently. "It's okay," he whispered. "There's nobody out there. Trust me on that."

I slipped down the tree, crouched by the trunk, and plotted a course through the shadows and shrubs, moving quietly from building to building, observant. But I saw nothing unusual. I did not go back to my barracks. I went to the Goldmans' house instead, taking the way through the dunes that I had used that first day on Ft. Ord instead of walking along the edge of the road that went to the lifers' housing compound.

Ed and Edna were on the patio, the grill closed down for the night, beer and chips on the table. "Can I join you?" I stepped out of the darkness by the fence.

"Paul, it's always such a scare when you show up that way."

"What, Edna? It's the only way he shows up. You should be used to it by now." Ed reached forward and pulled a beer from the cooler for me. "We were just talking about you."

"The response for Armed Farces Day has been fantastic," Edna said. "It's going to be the biggest demonstration ever."

"She exaggerates," Ed said. "But I'm happy for her. Apparently there was something on TV yesterday about it. Something happening at some rock concert this weekend that got the city all stirred up."

"The army's connecting the dots," I said. "I think they've figured out who my friend at the hospital is."

"It's too late even if they have," Edna said. "This has got a life of its own now. Calls are coming in from everywhere. And the donations. People are really opening up their wallets."

"I've assigned an intern from the office just to keep track of it all," Ed said. "Who would have thought my Edna would build a business where people just send her money in the mail?" There was pride in his voice.

"She's worked very hard at it," I said. "You've got a right to be proud of her." I sipped my beer, noticing that I had already drained it almost to the bottom. "I need to make a phone call," I said. "I need to call Jerry."

"He'll be asleep," Edna said. "Early to bed, early to rise. He says he gets his best ideas before the sun comes up."

"What if I woke him up?"

"If it's that important, I'll call him," Edna said. "He won't get mad at me if I wake him up." She went inside the house to phone.

"Thanks for giving Edna the credit that way," Ed said to me. "She's tried so many things over the years. But I know it was you that gave her the boost. She never stuck with anything long enough before."

"Like the health book?" I asked.

"Like the health book," Ed said and crunched a potato chip. "Actually, I'm glad she didn't stick with that." He leaned forward and opened me another beer. We sat on the patio and ate the chips, I nervously. My Sunday duty had been at JAG. The heat from the Pentagon was turning white hot, though the issues seemed to have little to do with me any longer. It was personal, some long-standing duel between Jerry and various of the Nixon appointees in the Attorney General's Office. There were numerous references in the documents coming into JAG referring to other cases in which Jerry had prevailed, warning the lawyers about previous tactics he had used. It was a pack of legal hounds, circling and sniffing each other, picking up familiar scents. The briefs seemed no longer to concern my simple act of non-compliance. Except that the Pentagon clearly saw that if I were removed from the equation, there would be no equation.

"He's on the phone," Edna called from inside. "He'll talk to you." I passed by her as she came back out onto the patio. "Whatever it is that's so important, do what Jerry says to do," she said. "He fixed it for Aptheker."

"All right," I said. "I'll follow Jerry's advice." I had looked up Aptheker. He had gone to prison. I wondered if Edna remembered that.

"The guys in Washington hate you," I said to Jerry. "There's a lot of heat coming down on JAG from there."

"You woke me up for that? Tell me something I don't know."

"The Pentagon wants me out of the equation. There's a lot of pressure on for JAG to do something."

"Covered," Jerry said. "I've got an injunction all typed up and sitting in Washington. Fifteen minutes after I hear that anything's happened to you, it'll be in front of Justice Douglas. Bill and I have been friends a long time." Jerry paused on the phone and I could see his head bob to punctuate the friendship. "He'll sign it."

"I hope you're right," I said. "Something's going to come down."

I sat chatting with the Goldmans, wondering how I could contact Cantell to warn him. "Sometimes, it's every man for himself," Ed said. "If your crew gets dumped overboard in a stormy sea, your first duty is to get to the lifeboat yourself. Then you can figure out how to save the others."

"Ed was in the navy, remember," Edna said. "The training's very good there."

"And there's another thing to consider," Ed said. "If they connect your friend up to you, you're a direct link to the CHP. Everything Edna's worked for might get smeared."

"McCarthy all over again," Edna said. "Now, after we're so close."

"You're probably right," I said. "I should just keep a low profile and let things work themselves out. I better get back to the base." For the first time since I had slipped beneath the Goldmans' fence and traipsed through the dunes to report for Basic, I had nowhere to go on Ft. Ord. Then I had just blundered in, with little to lose, and circumstance had begot circumstance. I sat in the dunes and reflected. Now I had a lot to lose. I had finally found Carol, and I wondered if I was, as I had in Africa, failing to heed the warnings, failing to stay away from Egypt.

Dawn came, reveille sounded. I walked on in to the fort and reported for the morning formation, expecting to be called in by the Company C commander. Nothing happened. I skipped mess and walked to the chapel, cutting off the main street and approaching the rear of the chapel through the shrubs. No birthday candle lay on the ground below the window. "Get to the lifeboat," Ed had advised. I backed away from the chapel, back through the shrubbery, and worked my way out to the main street. I joined the other soldiers on their ways to their duty posts, and walked up to the front of the chapel, timing my arrival to coincide with the chaplain's.

"Good morning, Chaplain," I said.

"Good morning, Paul." He looked me over from boots to cap. "Been to the laundry lately?" he asked.

"Sorry, sir. I pulled extra duty last night."

"Well, they should at least give you time to clean up. Maybe I should call your captain."

"I'd rather you didn't, sir. I'll go change at lunch time."

"Okay. I'll make the coffee this morning. I guess I'll be able to give you a hand for a change."

"Thank you, Chaplain. I appreciate that."

I wanted to climb the stairs to the choir loft and check for signs of search. But Parker had said to trust him. "I need to do that," I told myself. I thought about all the draftees who had come to the choir loft in the afternoons, trusting me to lay out their choices, to explain the actions they could take and the consequences they could expect. Some had followed through, some had not, but none had ever betrayed me. None had ever pointed a finger in my direction and said, "I heard it over there." I looked up at the cross over the altar, and for the first time I discerned the peephole Parker had carved

through the wall at the base of the cross. I had not toiled alone all those afternoons. Not all of them.

I pulled the vacuum cleaner out from behind the altar and turned it on. "Get to the lifeboat," I said, letting the sound of the vacuum motor drown me out. "Get to the lifeboat." I wondered how long ago it had been that I had vacuumed up the dust of Parker's peephole, and whose face I had swept it towards off the choir loft steps.

That afternoon, when my first case dropped by, I sent him with a message to Cantell. "Clean the van," it read. "Tell him it's urgent," I said. "Very urgent." Then I locked the chapel door and waited. The locked door was a signal I taught all my cases. If the door was locked, they were to walk away immediately. If it became safe to return later that day, I would leave the door ajar. And so I sat in my lifeboat, hoping that Cantell would understand the seriousness of my message, hoping that no one who came would not know the signal, that no one who approached would try the locked door and demand entry.

The choir loft was as I had left it. I spent time smoothing out the carpet, making sure that it nowhere revealed the papers I had hidden underneath it. I found some tubes of glue in the chaplain's typing-table drawer, and ran a bead of it around the carpet edges, hoping it would adhere to the floor. Then I moved the antique hall tree to the center of the landing and loaded a tiny pile of dust from the vacuum cleaner on the back of its base. No one could get by it without moving the hall tree and disturbing the dust.

And doomsday did not come. The afternoon passed, and I was one day closer to meeting with Carol. That, too, gave me unease. She had refused to give me her phone number. "The guy I'm with - I like him a lot," Carol had repeated. "I don't want you phoning. This is going to be very hard for me. Very hard."

"I just found you," I said. "I don't want to lose touch again."

"Just tell me where to meet you Saturday," she said. "And be there. Don't you dare not be there." I sat in one of the church pews and remembered the silence and emptiness of the tomb in Egypt, of Ramses the Whichever, not knowing that Nixon would soon announce the secret strike against Cambodia, that once more, all hell would break loose. History does repeat itself. But never exactly. Life would be far too easy if that were the case. I looked up at the chapel cross. "Are you up there, Parker?" I called. There was no answer.

Cantell caught up with me at mess hall that evening, sliding in beside me on one of the long bench seats. "I hope you didn't sign in to eat here," I said. Cantell usually ate at the hospital mess.

"I didn't," he said. "I blew that sign-in business off. What's with the message?"

"Did you do it?"

"Hell, yes. One of the doctors loaned me his car. I stuffed everything into the wig trunk, put the trunk in the doctor's car, and then dumped the trunk at the Goodwill donation place. Everything's clean."

"The joints, too."

"Those, too. Somebody at the Goodwill's going to get a nice surprise." Cantell chuckled at the thought of it. "They're going to get real happy back in the sorting room for a while."

"There were MPs trailing you when you left the chapel yesterday. I think they figured you out from that guerrilla theatre we put on at the Fillmore the other night. It

got on TV somehow." I realized I had not eaten since the chips and beer with the Goldmans the night before, and I was ravenous. Cantell chewed on his hamburger.

"They don't really have anything on us," Cantell said. "Those girls were practically naked. We just say we were acting silly trying to make it with the belly dancers."

"There's a lot more going on than that," I said. I was scraping my tin tray clean, still hungry.

"There is and there isn't," Cantell answered. "I left the van unlocked. They can go through it top to the bottom, all they want." He grinned. "Hey, I had to deal with the LA police department growing up. Believe me, the van's clean. Here, take these grapes." Cantell handed me a large bunch of fresh table grapes off his tray. "As for you and me, all we talk about when anybody can hear is sex and girls."

And nothing happened. I did not even have to ask Cantell to take weekend duty for me on Saturday. I was not assigned any.

Chapter Twenty Two

Carol brought camping gear, and I met her in the parking lot of a neighborhood supermarket. It was not far from the Goldmans, down by the main highway where the bungalows of their residential side-street gave over to commerce, a strip of shops, motels and bars that greeted soldiers when they passed the south boundary of the fort. Several of those businesses were Ed's clients, but I do not think the supermarket was. We walked into it to buy fruit and juice, bread and cheese. "Hey, look. Eggs," I said. Carol laughed.

"I guess you're never going to forget about that," she replied.

"No," I said. "Probably not. I wonder what that boy's doing now. Still selling eggs?"

"Or the boy that stood by the driver and pushed the windshield wiper back and forth. Do you remember him?"

"Sure. He argued with the old men that didn't pay. And then you shoved him when he put his foot in the crazy man's face." Around us, bins were piled with California's plentitude, big bundles of asparagus spears, bulging artichokes, cartons of large, ripe strawberries, heaps of grapes. Reminded of the eggs, Carol began grabbing from the various bins and filling the grocery basket.

"No starving this time," she said. "I remember you came up with some lame excuse about why those three old guys should've paid. I was about ready to pay the driver to throw you off the bus."

"I didn't really believe it when I was saying it."

The day was bright and sunny. Carol turned up the Carmel Valley road, driving away from the ocean, and once inland, she turned again. We climbed through hills on a narrow road; the forests were mixtures of scrubby oak, pines and madrone.

"Tassahara's the prettiest place," Carol said. "Even the name sounds pretty."

"You're pretty," I said. "Even your name sounds pretty."

Carol smiled. "You're nicer," she said. "You never said things like that before."

Carol was wearing jeans, a summer blouse, and had her hair tied with a blue bandana, the way it was on the Gondar road that day we got off the bus and walked down into the Blue Nile Gorge. "Somewhere about the middle of the week, I suddenly realized I didn't remember what you were wearing the other night at the Fillmore," I said.

"Something real nice," she said. "A lot better than what you were wearing. That was awful."

"So what do you expect on a private's pay? Real Levi jeans?" I looked at where the tag showed on hers.

"I guess you have been scraping by a long time," Carol said. "I shouldn't have said that."

"I made pretty good money for awhile," I said. "Except for a business deal I got into with McIntyre that didn't work out. I've even become an investor."

"You saw Mac again? I wrote to him once, trying to find out about you."

"Was it a post card, with a picture of that big white hotel in Khartoum on it?" I asked.

"That might have been it. I stayed in a big white place the night in I flew into Khartoum. When they shipped us out of Egypt, while we crossed, I wrote everybody I

could think of asking about you. Just little short notes on whatever I had in my pack to write on, and I probably had some post cards from that hotel. When the boat got to Athens, I went right to a post office to buy stamps, and then realized I hadn't changed any money. But the teller took dollars anyway. I guess he could see I was worried."

"Mac did tell me once that he'd heard from you. He didn't say you'd asked about me." I remembered talking with Mac about it in the Thorn Tree Lounge, and I remembered the tiny thrill of elation I had felt over some mental out-maneuvering I did in the imagined ordering of Carol's love life. That tiny thrill, that minutest of victories had been enough to stop me, to keep me from pressing on, from discovering from McIntyre that Carol cared. Do we make these mistakes often? How rare it is that we get a chance to turn the prism on past errors, to shade with any certitude an old event in new colors, new colors that have the hue of truth.

"I didn't hear anything back from him," Carol said. "Nothing at all."

"He drank a lot. More and more, I think." I did not tell Carol the details of the conversation Mac and I had about her post card. I was finally with Carol again, and I did not want to talk about Mac. Definitely not. "I'm glad your hair is still long," I said. "Like it was that day we stood there watching the bus disappear, and you pulled the bandana out of your hair. I wanted to kiss you then."

"The most beautiful place on God's green earth," Carol said. "I wish you had kissed me there." We drove up and over a last hill, surrounded by California scrub forest, and the road ended, broadening out into a gravel parking area. "There's a trail up ahead on the left. It leads down along the river to some campsites. Very private campsites." We packed in, to the last campsite at the very end of the winding forest trail. Somewhere uphill from us a gong sounded, the reverberations vibrant as they rang through the trees.

"That's up at the monastery," Carol said. "The private part. Down here's for the public. But nobody ever comes down here. They all want to be up where the gong rings. So here is public, but it's the most private part." Flowing by the campsite, a small river broadened and narrowed, making shallow pools at the wide parts, then narrowing and deepening before it spilled into the next pool. Rocks sticking up out of the shallow water were white where they had dried in the sun.

"Now tell me," Carol said, "how you ended up in the army. And what kind of mess do you have yourself in?"

But we can never unwind our past so straightforwardly. In looking back, we see the connections, we see with clarity what was once obscure. What one time befuddled and baffled us becomes a link in a great chain of cause, and we color in the canvas, flattening out, or curving round, the bumps and punctures of our lives, distorting time and perspective like we are figures in a Picasso painting.

"Khaireldin arranged to deport me," I said. "He didn't like our making love in his sacred tomb, and when he got hold of my letter from Cairo, he found out I'd skipped out on the draft. So he fixed it somehow to turn me over to American authorities and get me sent back and arrested in the US."

"How'd he know we made love?" Carol asked. "I didn't tell him."

"I did, though," I said. "I didn't know what you had or hadn't told him, so I decided to stick close to the facts. His buddy, Colonel Shafii, thought we were Israeli agents. It was a lot more dicey for us than we knew."

"Where'd he get that idea?"

"That bad wine on the train. It was Jewish, and we drank it. Remember Khaireldin just let his glass sit there - never touched it. That was a test. To them at least. But Khaireldin told Shaffi we were too dumb to be agents."

"After the mob caught you, I was yelling at the old man in the hotel to do something. He was just standing there, trying to keep me from popping back out the door. I remembered Khaireldin. Do you remember, he told us he liked the restaurant at the Modern Karnak? The old man knew who he was and called him right away. I guess Khaireldin was pretty important."

"I was out cold," I said. "I woke up on a stone floor in the jail."

"The crowd was going to drag you around in the streets. Khaireldin and some military police showed up fast and took you away from the mob."

"What about you? I remember you getting through the door, and then I got clobbered."

"There was a back part of the hotel, an inner compound with a high wall around it from some other century. Khaireldin told the old man to put me in there and then he sent a couple guards over."

"Things had calmed down by the time I woke up," I said. "I was unconscious a long time."

"I know," Carol said. "Khaireldin let me visit you just before he put me on the train north. You were just laying there on the stone floor, but he said it was still too dangerous to send you to the hospital. That's why I was afraid maybe you were dead."

"But you tried to find me anyway?"

"I sent a letter every week to the American Express in Cairo, for a while. And to the American Express in Malta, Cypress, Athens, Tobruk, any place I thought you might land coming out of Egypt. I knew you liked American Express."

"Khaireldin was probably confiscating your Cairo letters to me, too. At least until he sent me north. He might have lied to me about losing the letter you left."

"Maybe, to him, keeping us apart was some little speck of revenge for his country getting bombed. Everybody seemed to blame America as much as Israel. More even."

"Where did you end up after you evacuated?" I asked.

"I based in Athens, mostly. I'd travel around some, come back, and then check to see if you'd picked up the letter I left you at the American Express there. I put your Athens letter in a bright pink envelope so I could see it up there in the rack behind the counter if you hadn't picked it up."

"I slipped away from the guards in Cairo and went the other way," I said. "South, down to Uganda. There wasn't any time to check for letters in Cairo."

"You went backwards, like we would've gone if we'd turned around when Khaireldin warned us. What was it like?"

"Tough," I said. "Awful in parts. There are places on the way down there that nobody lives in because they're infested with tsetse fly. You can die even if you are vaccinated."

"Inoculated," Carol said. "Vaccination's different."

"Inoculated," I agreed - protection that wears out, that ends one day and leaves you vulnerable again. One day you're shielded, and then one day, you're not. As my

protection was running out at Ft. Ord. Gonzalez. Was he the disease or the cure? I had no protection against him. He asked for help, and I gave it. But Sergeant David, who had busted me that first day for communism, was someone that I thought had long been purged from my system. I should have paid more attention when Carol made the distinction between inoculation and vaccination. I can see that, looking back, connecting the dots. I did not understand how virulent lifer hatred could be.

There was an epidemic once, in 1919, of a flu that swept the world. It started in Ft. Leavenworth, Kansas, mutating in a smokestack, where soldiers training to go to the trenches of World War I shoveled pig manure into a furnace that fired the barracks' heating system. The soldiers carried the virus to the trenches in Europe, where there were a thousand ways to die, and no one noticed the flu deaths. Then came peace, and the massed soldiers of the world spread homeward across the globe, carrying the virus, stronger, mutated, more lethal than it had ever been. The soldiers killed millions in the war. But they killed even more millions in the virulent peace that followed.

I had, in the weekend duties I had uncomplainingly pulled, found and expunged the records that referred to the little booklet of communist propaganda Sergeant David so objected to. As for the strange orders I received at the end of Basic, with those Jerry was shaking the columns at the Pentagon. Once I might have objected to Carol's correction of my semantic mistake, tried with deft abstractions to work my way around it, and then, perhaps, I might have noticed. But. I did not notice; that is the fact. My protection was breaking down.

"I used to go to the American Express offices hoping that there was a letter from you," I said. "I checked Kampala, Nairobi, Mombasa. Others."

"We got the geography wrong," Carol said. "I think I did send one separately for you to Asmara, when I wrote the post card to Mac."

"How long did you wait in Athens?"

"Quite a while. I traveled in and out. There were the nicest camping resorts on the Black Sea, in Bulgaria, that the government ran. They were really cheap. I'd go up there, then take a bus back down to Athens to check. One night I came back, and there were tanks all around the main square, and shooting going on. I think they called it the Colonel's Coup in the papers."

"I don't remember it," I said. "A lot of that time right after Egypt is pretty fuzzy for me."

"After what happened in Egypt, the tanks in the square freaked me out. When the airport opened again, I got the first plane back here that I could. By then, half the time I was convinced you were dead. And I knew if you had just run, without pushing me in front, you'd have made it into the hotel. I haven't left America since. And maybe I won't. Never again."

"I didn't think about that," I said. "Not when we were running, and not after. Getting you back safe, that was all instinct, maybe the rightest thing I've ever done. I never thought about it any other way. I never resented it, never regretted it. Not for an instant. Not for the beat of a thought. Never."

"I didn't think you did," Carol said. "But that couldn't change the way I felt." We sat on a rock ledge, our feet in the shallow water, warmed by the late afternoon sun. Sometimes the gong rang, sometimes once, sometimes twice, but no one ever disturbed

us. We were in, I knew, one of Carol's beautiful places, but whether from an old list, from a new list, I did not know.

"What about your list?" I asked. "The one with all the beautiful places on it."

Carol smiled. "There is that," she said. "It's still a long list. I didn't get much checked off."

"I went to a lot of beautiful places," I told her. "Places I thought might be on your list if you were in that part of the world. I even thought I saw you once, in the gardens at Shalimar."

"Shah Jahan's ruins," Carol said. "Yes, I'd go see those. He was such a romantic. Where else did you think I'd go?"

"Bamian," I said. "I was sure you'd be there, sitting in the lotus position below the big Buddha."

"That's one that I don't know. Where is it?" So it was impossible to keep our conversation on a straight course, to marshal a chronology of our lives kept solely within the interim of our parting and meeting. Besides, the day was hot, the river cool, and we made love. Like we had before. We talked and we made love, and talked and made love more, and day turned into night. Real stars and planets were spread across the sky of our lovemaking this time.

"There was a night on the ferry coming down Lake Nasser to Aswan," Carol said. "We were laying on our sleeping bags, looking up at the night sky, kind of like we are now." Carol's head was on my shoulder, a length of her long hair pulled across the cleft of her breasts. "We saw all those shooting stars that night. Do you remember?"

"Yes," I said. "But your head wasn't on my shoulder. And you weren't naked."

"I woke up, once, while it was still dark, and you weren't there. I always wondered where you went."

"Walking around the boat. Talking to some of the crew. I really don't sleep very much."

"I felt deserted," Carol said. "Like you should've been there and you weren't. I know it's silly, but that's the way I felt."

"Khaireldin was always hanging around. Always right on top of anything you were doing. I wanted to shield you."

"Don't desert me again, Paul. Not if this starts to go somewhere. I won't go through it all again. Not for anything."

We had loved as much as talked. We dallied, played, laughed, enjoyed who we had been to each other, and who we were now. There was so much that lay in between that was still unspoken. There had been no place in our day for me to speak of U Tu, of how he had gently talked me round my fear of prison, a crucial link without whom I would not then be laying by the gentle waters of Tassahara entwined with the woman I loved.

Nor had there been a place for Carol to tell me about the man she lived with, someone she had told me she liked a lot. It was territory I did not approach. I think it was the memory of her riding away with McIntyre. I did not want to again place her on a road where she would face that choice. She would have to take us there herself.

"Next weekend's your big day," Carol said. "I'm coming down. A lot of us are coming down. I mean really a lot. How'd you ever get so big in this?"

"Just one thing leading to the next," I said. "I doubt most people have any idea how huge this has gotten - not just Armed Farces Day - but the whole disgust with our senseless war. Do you know about the tides at Halifax?"

"The biggest in the world. They rise so fast that tourists who don't know about them get caught and drowned."

"It's like that. It's rising and it's going to spill over. Way, way over."

"I talked to some people about you - or the Insurgent General or whoever you are. There are all kinds of amazing stories."

"It's those actors. They put the character in their skits after that first newscast, and they just go off in all directions with it. It does make good theatre."

"You should've seen you up on that stage," Carol said. "It was like you fit right in. I couldn't tell you weren't one of the actors. Except for that awful imitation Che Guevara costume." She laughed. "You've got to let me do your props and make up for you next time."

"No next time," I said. "I think that almost got me caught."

"You said you've done a lot of stuff the other night. Is it serious things? Criminal? I mean everybody's been busted on the civil disobedience stuff. We get right out again."

"I don't think it's anything that would be criminal in regular court. But the military is different. If they can get you into a court-martial, they can put you away for a long, long time for just tiny little things. There're lots of soldiers they've already done it to, and I've done a lot more than most of them."

"But you didn't really derail a troop transport in Washington?"

"No," I said.

"Or tear-gas a general's meeting at The Presidio? Or sink a barge load of Agent Orange in the harbor?"

"No, none of that. What I'm doing is helping people, one by one. The army intimidates draftees with their own ignorance. I get them on their feet, able to speak with their heads held high." Or like Parker, hide. Parker was not the only one I was coaching through gray areas of the regulations, only the closest by, and I did not doubt that while each individual had firm, if strange, legal earth beneath his feet, if the army traced down all the strands of the spider web to find me at the center, I would find myself standing on the quickest of sand. Conspiracy would be a very long time in prison.

"What about the CHP and Armed Farces Day? Aren't you part of that? "

"Way in the background, mostly. The CHP is actually registered as a church group. The chaplain I work for has had quite a few meetings with them."

"So you're covered there?"

"Well-covered. I type up his correspondence to the CHP. I make his appointments."

"Then what is it you're afraid of?"

I almost said it. Prison. But I did not. "There's a third thing," I answered. "I had orders to Vietnam, and I didn't accept them. It's a long story, but if it ever gets to the Supreme Court, it could stop the war cold. Dead in its tracks. It would bring down the whole draft system. The Pentagon's furious."

"I haven't heard anything about that."

"My lawyer wants it quiet. He's been in a lot of national cases, and he says it's not time for the newspapers yet."

"That's a lot for me to think about," Carol said. We fell silent beneath the stars, pursuing elsewise our relationship. Deer came walking on the trail, caught our scent and darted off into the trees. Raccoons came down the riverbank on the far side and hunted for crayfish in the shallow water, turning up rocks in the silver moonlight. Night edged into early dawn, but I stayed close. I did not leave Carol's side.

So I had time, while she slept, to think it through, to think about why I did not pull duty the very weekend that the fort was preparing for the swelling threat of Armed Farces Day, but I did not put in the effort. It was preparing, too, for the furious call for more replacements to ship to Southeast Asia as the front end of expanding the war into Cambodia went into motion, before its public announcement.

I had kept the chapel closed in the afternoon all the past week, taking no new cases and leaking out the word to my current group to stay low. Cantell and I had even gone to a rec hall and shot pool together one night, keeping up a constant chatter about sex and girls. "I think the van got searched," Cantell told me afterwards, when we were outside. "I went through everything to make sure nobody planted anything and locked it back up."

"So maybe we're in the clear?"

"I think so. You can bet they have stills from the film of us that was on TV, and if they were going to match us up, they'd have done it by now." We had tried to be conspicuous in the rec hall, just two regular army buddies that liked to get drunk, shoot pool and chase women. Outside we had slipped into a building shadow to watch for signs of being followed. But we saw none.

"There's something else," Cantell said. "The hospital is on high emergency alert over your Armed Farces Day party. We're running drills for dealing with casualties."

"It's not supposed to get violent," I said. "Edna is issuing instructions to the group leader on every bus. It's completely non-violent."

"The army's not Edna. They're putting riot squads in those warehouses on both sides the south gate. Bayonets, billy clubs, arm shields. I think they're even putting a couple small tanks in there to block the buses. I'm not sure about the north gate."

"How do you know this?" Out along the street, enlisted men came and went from the rec hall, but we saw no traces of lifers and MPs.

"My unit's got drills assigned for getting casualties from the south gate to the hospital. I don't think they're expecting as much to happen at the north gate."

"Edna's got the whole thing routed through the south gate," I said. "The army must know what the plans are."

"They should," Cantell said. "I can tell you why we're losing the war in Vietnam if they don't know that."

"Why, other than we're fighting for the wrong people for the wrong reasons?"

"Because of what it says on all the posters," Cantell said. "Rally at the south gate." So I did not think deeper, did not examine the situation with greater rigor. I did not pull duty that weekend, and happy at Tassahara, thought no more of it. Instead, as the sun rose, I woke Carol and we climbed upstream to a small waterfall. The rising sun made prisms in the droplets that spattered up where the falling waters splashed.

"When we lit those torches in the tombs, it was a lot like the colors dancing in those water drops," Carol said, "the way the stars and planets came and went in the torch

flicker, the way the colors bounce in and out of the water. I've tried to get that to happen sometimes at the Fillmore."

"And?"

"It's never been close. Maybe it was the paint the pharaohs used. Pure gold or something." Our conversations were like that that morning, headed nowhere, intentionally inconsequential. We were happy with where the previous day had brought us, and we were content to not disturb that happiness. We lingered in Tassahara.

Chapter Twenty Three

"Gonzalez." Cantell spoke his name quietly into the phone, cryptic. I had not heard of Gonzalez before. "Get over here to the hospital if you can." Monday morning had been busy, the chaplain fretting about the CHP's involvement in Armed Farces Day. "We've tried to reach out," the chaplain complained. "We've shown them the army is a reasonable organization, a Christian organization. Remember Prentiss? Remember that letter I wrote for Prentiss?" So that morning I drafted a "statement of reconciliation" for the chaplain to take home and fuss over in the afternoon.

"I've left blank places where you can put in quotes from the Scriptures," I said. "You're really good at that. Try to find verses that Jews use, too. I'm sure the CHP will try to meet us halfway." Cantell had phoned almost as soon as the chaplain left. I locked the chapel door behind me and went to the hospital, cutting through one of the mini-PX snack shops that were always busy during noon hour, then in the front and out the side door of a deserted Personnel building, its personnel gone to lunch. I had pulled Saturday duty amongst its rows of file cabinets more than once.

"Put a hospital smock on," Cantell said. We intercepted a lunch cart. "Take that tray," Cantell told me and led me into a wing I had not visited before. Down the hall a bored stockade MP stood in front of a closed door, his boots spit shined, his fatigues crisp and starched. I noted a stripe he wore, indicating a second tour of duty, a budding lifer, and knew I had nothing in common with him. "Lunch for Gonzalez," Cantell called to him. The MP opened the door and stood aside. "We'll make sure he doesn't stab himself with the silver," Cantell told the MP. "Take a smoke break if you need it."

"Thanks, I will," the MP said. "Door's locked from the outside till I'm back though."

"Idiot," Cantell said. "These doors can't lock on the inside. Fire regulations." But the windows had metal grates over the outside, and there was no furniture in the room, just a bed. Gonzalez lay on it, flat on his back. His eyes were brown, but I did not think he looked particularly Mexican, not in the Cesar Chavez way at least. On a hanger next to the bed, from a cupboard handle, hung his stockade fatigues, stamped to make anyone who wore them instantly recognizable as a prisoner. "This is the third time he's been in here. Look at this." Cantell pulled down the sheet that covered Gonzalez, who was dressed only in his skivvies. Dark contusions dotted his thighs, inside and outside. Cantell spoke in Spanish to Gonzalez. "*Este es mi amigo, El Jefe de Insurgencia*." Gonzalez took me in with his eyes, silent. "I grew up with Chicanos in LA," Cantell said. "Great parties. Gonzalez and I think I might have dated a cousin of his." Cantell spoke more Spanish. Gonzalez winced and rolled up so I could see his back. "Somebody kicked him right in the kidneys."

"They seem to like kidney punches," I said. "Is there internal damage?" I was still holding the tray of food. In the bare room, there was no nightstand on which to put it down.

"It's just bad bruising. Worse than yours was, though. It's worse each time they bring him in. We've got to get him out of there."

"Ask him why they're doing it," I said.

Cantell and Gonzalez spoke in Spanish. "He says there's no reason. Some sergeant just comes around with a couple MPs, picks him out and does it."

"I guess I'm not surprised. Getting him out though, I don't know. Maybe I could talk to my lawyer friend about it." Gonzalez had rolled back down, flat on his back. His eyes flicked from me back to Cantell.

"There's not time for legal hocus pocus. This is serious beating going on."

"You mean we should break him out?"

Cantell and Gonzalez both stared at me. "He can't take another kick in the kidneys," Cantell said. "And look, they're doing it between his legs, too." I looked again at the bruises on Gonzalez's thighs, and he pulled the legs of his skivvies up. Bruises ran all the way up to his groin.

"There couldn't be a worse time," I said. "The whole fort's gearing up for Armed Farces Day. Everything's going on alert. And you know our situation. I'm still closed down."

"Gonzalez is Mexican. An illegal. He got picked up in a sweep and joined the army because the judge offered it as a way to get citizenship. All he's getting is beat up."

"I don't know how to do it," I said. "Most of my cases are ones where I find some weak spot in the system first, some advantage to exploit. And what kind of shape is he in to get away?"

"Better than he looks," Cantell said. "I put a ton of pain killer in some capsules for him and then labeled the bottle as aspirin. He's bruised, but everything moves, and he's not feeling the pain." Cantell smiled. "He's not feeling the pain at all."

"We still need a plan."

"*Ayude me*," Gonzalez said. I looked at him. He looked at me. "*Ayude me*." Help me. Gonzalez looked over at Cantell and spoke rapidly in Spanish.

"He just wants to get back to Mexico," Cantell translated. "Back over the border, the other way, and he'll never come back again."

"When?" I said. "How?"

Cantell grinned. "Leave it to me," he said. "We just have to get him off the base. He's got family in the lettuce fields over at Salinas. All these guys got family. You've never seen family like a Chicano's got. Beyond the base, they'll take it from there." Cantell pulled the sheet back up over Gonzalez and a few minutes later the MP opened the door. We turned around with lunch untouched, and left. "He said he couldn't eat," Cantell said, letting the MP inspect, showing that we were leaving with all the silverware.

"Yeah, not after the way I busted his chops," the MP said, a glimmer in his eye, the edge of a smirk on his lip challenging us, asking us if we wanted make anything of the way he treated prisoners.

"*Gracias, Jefe*," I heard Gonzalez whisper.

Cantell's plan was simple, and simple plans usually work best. "We stay separated," Cantell said. "I won't move until I hear from you that Gonzalez is in place. And by then, you'll be well away from the action." We were up in the choir loft, looking out the window. Twice a week, stockade prisoners not in solitary were marched to the base natatorium for exercise. I had seen them occasionally, formed up, guards at front and rear, marching by the chapel in their stamped stockade fatigues. The natatorium was several buildings south of the chapel, back towards the heart of the base. "They don't always pass by here," I said. "There's several routes the guards could march them."

"But there's just one door they use to march them inside," Cantell said. "They lock the front door when they clear out the natatorium to bring the prisoners over." Our problem was to get Gonzalez a change of clothes, to provide him a set of civvies. "They march them directly in the dressing room door on the south side. Gonzalez goes in, changes to the civvies, and comes right back out the dressing room door." That was Cantell's plan.

"Where could it go wrong?" I asked. It was something U Tu had taught me, the root of his patience. If we put our effort into avoiding failure, success would follow. At least, he liked to say that, going around to the press offices in Bangkok.

"Each prisoner takes his own towel with him from the stockade," Cantell said. "Rolled up, regulation way. You've got to get him a thin shirt and a thin pair of slacks. Roll them up in an army towel. Right where the column comes around the front of the building, there's a blind spot for about two steps. That's where you can switch towels."

"What about shoes? Army boots won't look right."

"Get him some and put them around back, in the bushes. Gonzalez will turn to the rear when he comes out. Show him the shoes and get him the hell out of there."

My job was to lead Gonzalez parallel along the highway fence until he reached the north gate, a few buildings beyond the chapel. "There's a public phone at the gate," Cantell said. "Take some dimes. Once Gonzalez is out by the highway, phone me. He'll get into the shadows on the ocean side of the road. When you step away from the phone booth, that's his signal you've connected with me. Then I drive out the north gate, he steps out of the shadows, puts his thumb out, and I pick up a hitchhiker. Normal as could be. Guys hitch all the time from there."

"All right," I said. "You stay right at your phone. Don't be away from it for a second until I get the call through."

From the gate, Cantell was to drive him south, to the supermarket where I had met with Carol to start the camping trip. The two would walk in, Gonzalez would mix with his family waiting inside, and when they were gone, Cantell would buy some cigarettes and drive back to base.

"Sounds simple," I said. The guards did not know most of the prisoners. The stockade was filled with short-termers, AWOLS doing thirty days, guys who got drunk one time more than their company commanders were prepared to deal with, other petty infractors. It was a population that turned and turned and turned, and MPs relied on the stockade stamps on the prison fatigues to keep track of their charges in public.

Cantell was right about the blind spot at the natatorium. Gonzalez just needed to swing wide as he came around the corner, where another of Ft. Ord's untrimmed hydrangea would obscure the view while we made the exchange. I could step southward out of the bushes, away from the column as soon as I had his towel, and never be seen. "By the way," I said to Cantell when we finished going through the plan a second, and then a third time, "Thanks."

"For what?"

"For taking the initiative. For getting involved."

Cantell had made sure Gonzalez went back to the stockade with an order from one of his doctor friends that prescribed swimming as physical therapy for the bruises. I got the clothes, I let Cantell know I had them, and the plan was on. We stayed away from each

other. I left a note on Edna's patio table, informing her about the riot squads and the tanks the army was planning to hide in the south-gate warehouses. But it was too late to change the CHP's plans. Churches and peace groups were organizing buses to converge on that single location, and the United Farm Workers were coming in their crop trucks. The posters and letters were posted large and posted often up and down the coast from Mexico to Canada. Edna was staying late at the CHP office every night, and I did not want to show up there, sure that the CHP was being watched.

So I waited. The Gonzalez escape would take only a few minutes, as I timed it. The weak point, after the towel exchange, was his getting back out through the dressing room door. There was a latrine straight back from that door. Gonzalez was to step into the latrine and squat on a toilet while the rest of the column turned into the locker room to strip. When he heard the group formed up and marched out into the swimming area, he was to slip back outside, dressed in the civvies, and once away from the door, I would lead him north. The chapel phone rang.

"They've left the stockade," Cantell said.

I hung up immediately, took the towel I had prepared, and went south along the main street to the natatorium. The evening had just turned dark, the street lights were on. I passed the natatorium, then turned in the direction of the highway when I passed the next building and circled back, waiting on the far side of the first hydrangea bush, wearing jeans and a dark shirt. The front MP came round the corner and passed, unaware of me. The column followed, nobody marching in step, desultory. I stepped into the space between the two hydrangea bushes, Gonzalez swung wide, and our hands touched briefly as we made the switch. I shoved his towel inside my shirt and was away.

I went south again, to a trashcan where I dumped the towel, and then came back around the same building I had circled earlier. Gonzalez's shoes were behind the natatorium, a pair of sneakers from Goodwill. I was proud of the deal I had gotten on the sneakers. They were from the half price bin. I bent down to pull the shoes out of the shrub in which I had hid them. A boot sent me sprawling into the bush; the branches bounced me out, and I fell, twisted round on my back, the sneaker laces caught in my fingers, holding my arm up into the bush.

"Gotcha, you commie son of a bitch." Sergeant David, pistol drawn, stood above me, an MP patch on his arm gleaming in dim light from the natatorium's single rear window. "I wasn't sure when you'd do it, but I knew if I beat that little spic long enough and hard enough, you'd show up somewhere." Inside, from the open window, I could hear MPs barking at the prisoners to hurry it up. The prisoners swam naked and the MPs were shouting at them to strip. Sergeant Dave reached down with his free hand, grabbed me by the shirtfront, and pulled me half upright. "On your feet."

He had the pistol pointed at my forehead. "Turn around." He pushed me up against the back of the natatorium, right beside the corner around which Gonzalez was to step if he made it out the door. His hand was on the back of my neck, pushing my face into the side of the building. "I'd love to pull the trigger, but you've got choices."

"What?" I said, hoping Gonzalez would hear me. Until he walked around the corner in his civvies, there was no crime. I had dumped the towel.

"You got new orders, right here in my pocket. To Cambodia. Plane leaves tonight, and I'm taking you to it. That's what the Pentagon wants. You to sign this paper saying you take the orders to Cambodia."

"And the choice?" I asked.

"You can join your wetback buddy in the stockade. My stockade. You know what? I hope you take the stockade." He pushed the gun barrel into the middle of my back and let go of my neck, then reached down with his free hand, grabbed my left wrist and twisted. My opposite hand still held the sneakers with the laces twisted in my fingers. He pulled my arm up, still twisting, until it was out straight, pushing my left shoulder into the building. "The Pentagon's looking for someone to blame for what you done. They're trying to screw me for it because I rigged your orders. "

"So it was you."

"Yeah, me, and guess what. Shit flows downhill, sonny." He twisted harder on my arm. "Take a little step out to the right, so the wetback can see you. Let's let those shoes dangle out there for him. He takes those from you. Oh boy, he takes those from you." Then Sergeant David would have me, caught abetting an escape. It was long, hard time in the army's prison system. Or accept the orders. Cambodia or the stockade, right now. Either way, the lawsuit was finished.

I stepped out. He kept my left shoulder pinned against the corner, my arm twisted. Inside I heard the prisoners being marched out of the locker room, MPs shouting at them to hurry it up. I looked back at Sergeant David. He let his gun hand down as he shifted his stance to better crush my shoulder into the building and Gonzalez roll blocked him from behind, right at the knees. Sergeant David pitched forward against the building, wrenching my arm up as he fell, trying to hold on. Inside, the locker room had gone silent as the doors to the pool swung shut, the prisoners out on the apron, diving and splashing into the water, doing some whooping. The pistol fired, straight down into the ground, once, the report mixed in with the splashing and whooping coming out the window. Sergeant David pitched back off the building, his knees driven into the siding. I jerked and swung him further off balance. Gonzalez was already up, and as Sergeant David hit the ground, Gonzalez brought a booted foot straight down into his solar plexus.

"Come on," Gonzalez said. "We've got two, maybe three minutes to disappear."

Get to the lifeboat. Ed's advice flashed through my mind. I pointed towards the chapel. Gonzalez guided me from bush to bush, shadow to shadow; I guided him to Parker's tree. "We gotta do stuff like that sometimes crossing the border," Gonzalez whispered. "That stomp puts them down long enough to run. But they get up again."

"Your English sure got better."

"Sometimes a Mexican has to play dumb up here in this big, wonderful country of yours." I led Gonzalez up the tree. Parker had the window open.

"That was a gunshot," Parker said. "Right from the direction you come. I knew when you got that phone call, it was all coming down tonight. I had a feeling. A powerful feeling."

"What's this place?" Gonzalez asked.

"It's safe," I said.

"No, it's not," Parker said. "Don't you know you've been made?"

"But how?"

"Doesn't matter how. Probably that dumb plan of yours that I heard you talkin' with your white bro'. Don't you know nothing that easy never works? Doesn't. Never." Full dark had fallen outside, and it was dark in the attic. A whistle blew, sharp, shrill, piercing.

"He's back up," Gonzalez said. "They'll start searching now."

"They be coming," Parker said. "Maybe sooner, maybe later, but they be coming to this place."

"Then we can't be here when they do," I said. "Where's that corporal's suit I brought up here last time."

"Hanging on that nail," Parker said, but it was too dark to see where he pointed. His hand took my shoulder, and I suddenly realized it had been badly wrenched when Gonzalez rolled into the sergeant.

"We need your uniform, Parker. Give Gonzalez your fatigues. Put them on right over your civvies," I said to Gonzalez.

"And Parker? What's Parker going to wear?" Parker said.

"I don't know," I said. "These maybe." I handed him the sneakers. "It's all I've got left to give."

"Parker don't ask for more than that," he said, and in the darkness, I heard and felt him stripping away his fatigues while I put the corporal's uniform on over my street clothes.

Parker waited by the window, staring out, and when he told us to go, we went, down the tree and then further north, away from Sergeant David and the natatorium, Gonzalez picking the shadows and bushes. "We can't go out the gate," I said. "They'll be there already." At some point we had to turn east, away from the highway fence, and cross Ft. Ord's lighted main street. Beyond were more buildings and shadows to shield us, and then the dunes.

"This is it," Gonzalez said. "There's too much street light up by the gate." We edged along a building towards the main street.

"We're just a corporal and a private out for a walk. Coming off late duty," I said. "If we get stopped, I'll talk and you just speak some Spanish."

"*Oh, si senor*," Gonzalez said. He pointed along the street. An MP jeep sat in a shadow about two blocks south.

"They're looking for guys in civvies," I said. "These disguises will have to work."

"Then I'd better speak English," Gonzalez said. "You heard the sergeant. They're looking for a spic. My name's Parker." He pointed to the name printed atop the shirt pocket.

"You heard that about spic and wetback?"

"That's why I came out the window. When we cross the border, we always plan that the coyote might have been made. Somebody in the group always changes the plan a little bit."

"Did I say thanks yet?"

"*De nada*," Gonzalez said. "Lets do it."

I took a deep breath and a first step. Along the street, a block beyond the MPs, Parker strolled out under a street light, dressed in skivvies and his army-green tee-shirt. He put his hand to his mouth, elbow way up in the air, and yawned. It was a big, loud yawn. He pulled his tee-shirt up and off, for all the world looking as if he were standing

in front of the bathroom mirror at the dawn of a new day, getting ready to shave. Then he turned straight towards the MPs, dropped his skivvies to his feet, and his hands to his groin. "I sure like pissing on the army's street," he called, a deep baritone call, and the MPs hit the starter on the jeep. Parker stepped out of the skivvies and ran, swift, a sprinter's run, chest out, knees high, a victory lap runner, fading into the darkness between the buildings, his black body disappearing just before the sneakers he was wearing disappeared also. Gonzalez tugged at my sleeve and we crossed the street. We circled wide, north of the hospital where Cantell waited for my phone call, and we got into the dunes, then worked back south. We went slowly, searching for the section of dunes I had walked so often going to the Goldmans, keeping the tall water tower with its blinking red warning light to our right.

"How long will your family wait for you at the supermarket?" I asked.

Gonzalez seemed genuinely surprised at the question. "They're family," he said. "Family waits forever."

"We've got to cross a road up here," I said. "Beyond that, we're safe." We waited near the top of a dune, watching the road. Back amongst the buildings in Ft. Ord's heart, amber lights flashed here and there, randomly. The water tower Ed had pointed me towards that first day was at a familiar distance now and I had my bearings. "Those yellow lights that are flashing are MPs," Gonzalez said. "Stopping people." Eventually a jeep rolled slowly by, going up towards the lifer housing, its headlights out, the amber light on its white pole turned off. "You stay here," Gonzalez told me. "Get down in the grass by that tree back there if you have to hide." He pointed down the dune behind us. "Don't go any further than that from this spot." Gonzalez disappeared in the direction of the jeep. I waited. Eventually the jeep rolled by again, going the other direction. Gonzalez appeared soon after. "We go now," he said. We crawled, down the dune and across the road, and into dune grass on the other side. I pointed Gonzalez into the gully that led to the Goldmans.

Crawling under the fence, my left arm collapsed. I rolled, scooted myself forward and cleared into the Goldmans' yard. Gonzalez came right behind me. "You need one of these, my friend," he said. In his hand was the little container of pain pills Cantell had made up for him.

The Goldmans' house was dark, lights out. Coals still smoldered in the grill. "Take the army stuff off," I said, and we both peeled to the civilian clothes we wore underneath. I went to the back of the grill, pulled open the clean-out, and pried out my coffee can. I took Parker's fatigues from Gonzalez, folded them and laid them on the coals. Then I laid the corporal's dress uniform on top of the fatigues.

"What about these boots?" Gonzalez asked.

"Give them to me," I said. I searched around under the patio chairs and found a pair of plastic thongs. I put the boots in their place and handed the sandals to Gonzalez. I hoped Ed and Edna would understand. It was the only sign I could leave them that I had passed by. The uniforms were smoking, smoldering on the coals, not flaming. I knew Ed would notice the strange residue when he poked in the ashes the next evening, but I doubted he would say anything to Edna.

We made our way down the street, two civilians who walked into a late-night supermarket, and then Gonzalez's family swept us south. Far south, through bean fields,

potato fields, grape fields, farther and farther south, and far beyond the border. While we fled, the White House announced Cambodia, and America erupted.

Chapter Twenty Four

While I waited for Ranjit to forward my plane ticket, I stayed with Gonzalez and his family in their village, not far from another Monterrey, the giant industrial city in Mexico's heartland. There was a party for me the night before I left. "Just family," Gonzalez said, but it seemed to me the whole town was there. The party filled the cobblestone square in front of the main church, and in the gazebo, a brass band played.

"Cantell said he might have dated a cousin of yours that lives in Los Angeles," I said to Gonzalez. We were sitting on the church steps, sipping beer. A bougainvillea bloomed in a big clay pot beside me. Strings of bare light bulbs were hung across a smoothed section of the square where friends were dancing.

"Sure, my cousin Dolores," Gonzalez said. "She goes to junior college."

"Can you get this letter to her?" I said. I handed Gonzalez an envelope, addressed to Cantell. "When he's down in Los Angeles again, ask her to give it to him. Hand delivery. Mailing it to the base is too dangerous."

"No hay problema," Gonzalez said. "But we can phone if you want. My country has long distance, too." He pointed across the square to the post office, where people were lined up at the government phone kiosks waiting for operators to connect their calls to relatives in the US.

"No," I said. "Cantell's in the clear, so let's keep it that way. He stayed put when I didn't call from the north gate. I saw his van in the parking lot when we circled around the hospital to the dunes."

"I was too scared to notice anything like that," Gonzalez said.

"You were scared? I was terrified. I was following you - I thought you knew what you were doing."

"That's what scared me," Gonzalez said and grinned. "I crossed the border enough times to know all the things that can go wrong." We tipped our beer bottles to each other, touching them, and drank. "But why was that sergeant beating on me?"

"It was all to get to me," I said. "They didn't care about Cantell. They didn't care about you. The Pentagon was bringing those orders down on me for Cambodia. If I signed their paper, that sank the lawsuit."

"Was it that important?" Gonzalez popped open the container of pain capsules. "Two left," he said, and we each swallowed one.

"Yes, it was that important," I said. "That's why they let me off the base that last weekend. So I wouldn't sniff out the orders coming down."

"But I didn't even know you. Why'd they beat me?"

"Sergeant David got picked to deliver the orders. Or more likely, he found out about them from his buddy, Major Miller, and volunteered." I remembered the bond I had sensed between them my first day at the fort. "But there was always the chance I wouldn't sign their paper. So the sergeant wanted to be sure I got nailed for hard time. Something with no legal loopholes."

"And how'd they figure out you were connected to Cantell?"

"From that van of his, I suppose. His name would've been on a report I filed once, with the Inspector General. When I got beat up, Cantell stepped in and did something.

They just figured history would repeat itself." Only this time, they knew that Cantell would take it to the Insurgent General instead of the Inspector General.

"How's that connect me into it?" The pills were starting to kick in, and we were both feeling a lot better. Momentarily, I wondered if Cantell had dipped into the army's morphine to make the capsules.

"Sergeant David was low guy on the army's totem pole, getting blamed for what I was doing, and the lowest guy down always gets the wrong end of the army's stick. So he was lashing out. He might've had a dozen other things going trying to smoke me out. You were the one that connected."

"So when you came to my room, the MP already knew who you were maybe?" Gonzalez said it as a question, but I heard it as a fact.

I remembered the MP's taunting comment, the curl of his lip, and I looked straight at Gonzalez. He had not been hit in the face. No one had busted Gonzalez in the chops. The MP had been thinking of how he was going to hit me, once I was in the stockade. "Yes," I said. "He knew. The clue was there, but I missed it. I grew lax." Gonzalez drove me to the airport in the morning. *"Adios, Jefe,"* he said and threw me a salute. I turned and walked through Emigration. At the end of the long flight to Bombay, Ranjit met me as I came out of customs. He hugged me a long time.

"At least one of you has come back," he said, stepping away and looking me up and down. Then he told me of U Tu, or rather, of the silence that had overfallen U Tu. We left the airport riding beside each other in the back seat of the company car, driven by the company chauffeur. Along the way, we stopped at a bank and I opened an account. Ranjit declared a company dividend on the spot and transferred the funds to me. "You won't be living at the Red Shield this time," he laughed.

We drove on and Ranjit directed the driver to tour us by the new pharmacies he had opened. "Each one is very small, but very visible," he said. "I stock only the inventory that sells very fast, and I re-supply everyday. One month open, and a new store already makes a profit."

"I don't see the Winona posters in the windows," I said, recalling a past inventory that had turned quickly.

"She came back," Ranjit said and laughed. "I had to stop that, fast." I saw Winona that night at Moti Mahal's Upstairs, along with Mohan Mohan and others from the film company. Winona asked what I had been up to, if I had had any acting jobs in America. "I did some stuff with a small troupe for awhile," I said, but she did not ask for any details. One poster of Winona had survived, still up behind the bar, where it had been when I left.

"New stories," Mohan said to me. "I need new stories." I was back on his payroll that evening, this time to be paid legally, an accredited foreign investor aiding India's burgeoning new economy. The Queen's Necklace glimmered, brighter than ever with new, high-powered lights installed along the curving seafront highway. Winona, newly married to Mohan Mohan, was impatient for work to begin on a new series for her. "Concepts, concepts," Mohan announced at the next staff meeting. "Anything fresh, anything new." Winona was sitting beside him as he said it, radiating, and we all understood his desire to catapult her back into nationwide fame.

Briefly, I dabbled with a story line about a beautiful foreign woman who came to India to live at a secluded monastery, somewhere near an ancient temple. But I knew it was not what Mohan had in mind for Winona's new role, and never pitched it. It is still in a box, on a shelf in a closet of my apartment that looks out over the Queen's Necklace. Mohan Mohan had, from the beginning, a leading-edge sense of India's swelling, prospering middle class, and despite the distractions of Winona, his films and television programs have rarely failed.

He has cut back his frenetic shooting schedule, however. In the summers, when the temperatures soar and the humidity sets Bombay into stifling swelter, Winona packs him off to England, where the weather is always cool. The week before they leave is always a full one for me. In long, long meetings, Mohan Mohan pours out the ideas for new films that have been incubating in his head over the course of the year's production schedule. I take notes, and when at last he is finished, the ideas all spilled out on the table, he says, "You make sense of it, Paul. You make sense of it." Soon after, he and Winona are on the long flight to London.

I take a flight to Bangkok, and then, with my pack and a portable typewriter, I catch a bus to the northwest. I go always to a village on the Burmese border, the place from which I am sure U Tu crossed over after we parted in Bangkok. I own a house in that village, a simple structure in a simple place, and the family I bought it from lives there most of the year. When I arrive each summer, there is always a great bustle as the family sets about cleaning the house and moving in with other family members a hundred yards farther west, almost on the border, if the border were actually marked.

I sit in the yard while they clean, and they serve me tea. I always insist that they take their laying hens with them, although the old patriarch of the family protests. "Chickens keep the snakes away," he says. But I never eat eggs. Not for years. Not even with salt. There is always an order to my summers there.

I arise early each morning that first week and embrace the cool mountain air, and as the sunrise finally throws enough light on the veranda table to see the paper clearly, I begin to type, a letter for Carol. I pick a point, a place, a time from that interim between Egypt and California, and I write it down, like it happened, like I remember it. I tell her, straightforwardly, one episode of the journey of how I got from the Pharaoh's Tomb to Tassahara, and how I got into the terrible mess with the army.

When the week is up, I choose a place, some wonderful place that I think surely worthy of Carol's list, and I send the letter to the American Express office closest by. I address it to her, care of me. Then I set to work on Mohan Mohan's story ideas, making sense of the long rambles, turning them into treatments that we will shape into films when we reconvene in Bombay, and he will parcel them out to the writing staff. I always write myself into one of the treatments, and Mohan Mohan never minds.

It took a long time for Gonzalez's cousin to deliver my letter to Cantell. He was back in LA arranging to go to school as the end of his army stint neared when Dolores finally got the letter to him. "I went to the Fillmore, like you asked," Cantell wrote not long after Delores contacted him. "I got down into that basement that you described, and some of the people there knew Carol. They said she had suddenly quit her job with the production crew and no one knew where she went. You never told me she had a job at the Fillmore."

Before I leave the mountain village, a shipment arrives from Ranjit, cleared through customs by a banker I know in Bangkok. The big crate has medical supplies, first aid kits mostly. Ranjit says it is U Tu's dividend, but I know that he is keeping that money safely in the bank for U Tu. I stack the kits in my village house, in the room where the patriarch sleeps. "You must give these to whoever needs one," I tell him. I know that he sells a few. It provides him with an economic standing in the family that he otherwise would not have. But he is a compassionate man, a good Buddhist. He waits by the road during the year and offers tea to travelers passing by, and during my evenings there, he tells me what he has learned of Burma and of its progress towards democracy, such as it has been.

When the time to return to Bombay nears, I go down to Bangkok and express my stories and my typewriter to Mohan Mohan's office. Then, by bus and by train as much as I can, I travel to the site I have picked that year for Carol's list. I give each site the time it is due, and when I am finished sightseeing, I check it off the list I keep pinned inside my pack. Then, hoisting it up, I head to the city, to the American Express office, and Carol's letter is always there, waiting for me, in its bright pink envelope.

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